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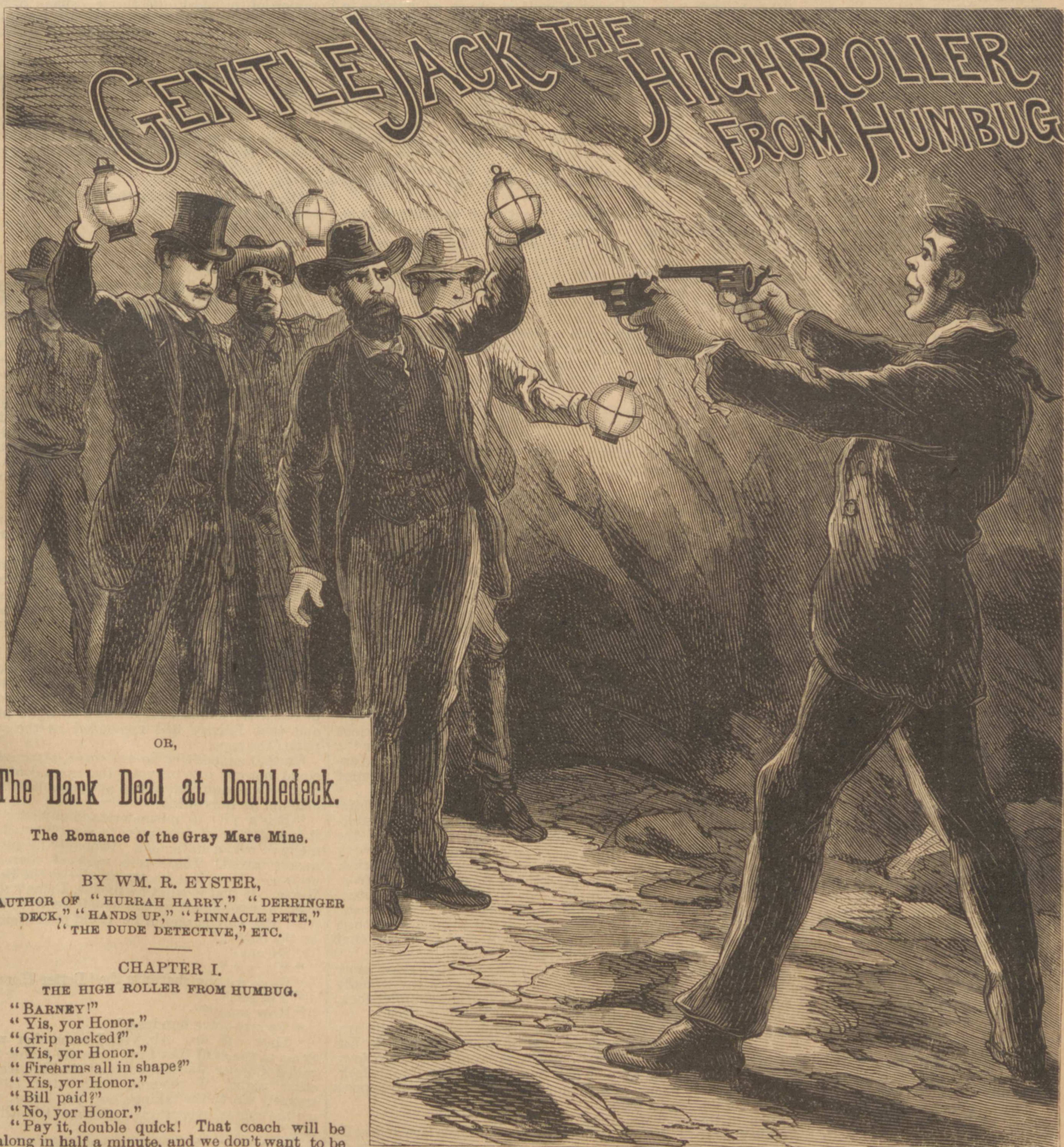
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OR,

The Dark Deal at Doubledeck.

The Romance of the Gray Mare Mine.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "HURRAH HARRY," "DERRINGER
DECK," "HANDS UP," "PINNACLE PETE,"
"THE DUDE DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HIGH ROLLER FROM HUMBUG.

"BARNEY!"
"Yis, yor Honor."
"Grip packed?"
"Yis, yor Honor."
"Firearms all in shape?"
"Yis, yor Honor."
"Bill paid?"
"No, yor Honor."
"Pay it, double quick! That coach will be
along in half a minute, and we don't want to be
left."

Barney scratched his head and looked as

HE THREW UP THE REVOLVERS HE HELD, AND COVERED THE JUDGE, AT THE SAME
TIME CHANTING: "OUCH! HOWLD ME, ME DARLINT, OI'M KILT."

through he was going to make a remark. Then the idea struck him that probably his curiosity would not be any the sooner satisfied, and that at best he would receive a withering look which would be worse than his ignorance. He turned away without a word, and, a moment later, might have been seen in conference with the landlord of the "Traveler's Rest"—which was the name on the signboard of the house at which they had been stopping for the last few days, while doing the town of Hard-Up.

The town was not yet "done," by any means, for, despite the lugubrious name of the place, Mr. Jack Armstrong had found that the local sports made a strong showing of both money and nerve. Though the campaign had so far been fairly profitable, there was still a goodly supply of coin that might be accumulated if everything continued to come his way.

Barney knew all this without asking; and had believed that, in the nature of things, they were good for a stay of at least another week in the town. So far as the grip and the firearms were concerned they were always supposed to be in order, since the staying and going of Gentle Jack, the High Roller from Humbug, was apt to be very uncertain quantities.

Barney Kain had been attached to the gentleman-faced Mr. Armstrong for several years, had become accustomed to his ways, and had been reasonably well educated to understand his wishes. So far as he could, he carried the latter out without note or comment; and through much experience had become convinced that, whatever they were, they would lead to something either lively or profitable.

Which it would be was generally determined by the condition of the exchequer. When funds were low Mr. Armstrong was usually in the vein for replenishing the supply. When rolling in wealth he was more than likely to drift into one or more of those adventures that Barney did not like—at least, until they were over.

The call for the bill was a surprise to the proprietor, who had counted on having the two as guests for some time longer, if, indeed, they did not settle down into something like permanent boarders.

"It's easy to figure it up," said Johnson, with a sigh. "I wish it was three times as large, and still a-growing. Mr. Armstrong has hardly been here long enough to get the hang of the town. I hear luck has been with him tolerably close, but, if he would wait a little longer the streak might swell into a regular cyclone. And if he got a bulge on in Hard-Up he could scoop in just as much coin as in any place of its size, from here to the Gate, and back again. Where is he going?"

"Sorran av me knows!" responded Barney, with a sigh of regret. "It's by the hearse he's a going, an' av ye know where *that* is bound for it's more about it that ye know than meself. Kape the change. It's not worruth while to bother wid the dirty half dollar."

It was not the habit of Barney to be so free with the odd dimes, but a glance from Jack told him that he had no time to spare. He turned away without further leave-taking, and was speedily out on the porch, with the grip in one hand, and a box, which he carried by a stout leather handle, in the other. A Winchester leaned against the wall, and over his arm there were a couple serviceable blankets.

When Gentle Jack strolled out his valet and all his other belongings were there, and the stage was coming around the corner.

There was a change of horses to be made; but, at well regulated stations that does not take long. By the time Armstrong had settled himself inside, which he did on a seat that appeared to have been reserved for him, and Barney had climbed to the roof, six fresh steeds swung the vehicle away from the Rest, and Hard Up had seen its last of Gentle Jack Armstrong.

"Quite palatial," murmured Jack, as he gave a comprehensive glance around, which took in the interior of the coach, passengers, and all.

"The company evidently intends to give all the trimmings that can make life happy. I haven't heard that there were any agents on the route, but no doubt the company has provided for that, and sooner than have us disappointed would send out a man or two to give us the regulation thrill. Barney!"

"Yis, sor!" thrusting his head down from above, so that he could peer into the window.

"Lay your Winchester down so that it will not be quite so plainly seen, but have it where it will be handy. The shadow annoys me."

"Yis, sor."

"And keep your eyes wide open. If any gentlemen of the road attempt to pull us up, you have my permission to shoot on sight—and I will hold you responsible for any waste of ammunition. That will do for the present."

"Yis, sor."

Barney's head disappeared, and Mr. Jack eased himself back on the cushions, and looked dreamily out of the window.

The other passengers stared curiously at the latest addition to their number. Even in the short time he had been with them they were beginning to wonder what sort of a fellow he was, anyhow. People who met him generally

did that; and seldom were able to perfectly satisfy themselves.

He was a handsome little fellow, and perhaps not precisely as little as at first sight he seemed. He was well put together, without an ounce of superfluous flesh anywhere, and—well, time may show whether the muscles of this clever young man were equal to the strain he unhesitatingly put upon them at all available opportunities.

He had a gray-blue eye, hair so light that it was almost yellow, and a long, silken mustache. His hands were small, and his feet matched them, being clad in neat but serviceable number fives. Just now the thin but well-chiseled lips were curved in a languid smile, and, if his appearance did not belie him, he was on most excellent terms with himself, and perhaps with all the world besides.

Long before the passengers had fairly begun to study him, Armstrong had *them* all sized up. Perhaps the satisfaction in his face came largely from that fact, though it was seldom indeed that there was any other look there than the present one of happy *insouciance*.

With a fairly full stage there was likely to be only a couple of the cargo who would attract especial attention, or who would be of importance.

These Gentle Jack had picked out before he was fairly seated; and though he waited to hear them speak before he positively made up his mind, he was pretty sure that he knew them as well as though he had traveled with them a month.

There was a young lady, in the first place.

Although she was silent for the most of the time, and kept herself as much as possible in the background, she would have attracted attention anywhere.

She was taller than the average woman; seemed young, and was very handsome. At the same time there was a somber look in her dark eyes that was not good to see. It argued ill for her peace of mind, and would, to most persons, say that there was a romance in her life that was not written on roseate pages. She was becomingly dressed, and yet after a manner that showed she had been and intended to be a traveler, and was ready for the road, and its chances.

So Jack figured it out; and probably he was the only one who had as yet suspected the little arsenal that was concealed about her person. Careless as Mr. Armstrong seemed to be in his intercourse with bad men, he had a habit of learning in advance where the hand of his *vis-à-vis* would drop to in case of the foolishness of shooting that will come of carrying fire-arms. He seldom made mistakes, the thing became an instinct, and had more than once served him a good turn. Batteries might be suddenly opened on him, but they had been but indifferently well masked.

The name of this young lady was Lillian Lord; but that did not appear until sometime later.

For second choice as the important item in the bill of fare Jack took Judge Haddington.

The judge was a large man, and an expansive one. He looked as if he would make two of the little sport, and have considerable material left. He was the magnate from Doubledeck who had been away on an extended trip, making arrangements in regard to the stocking of the Gray Mare Mine, and was returning reasonably well satisfied with the result of his efforts. He had been tipping the glass quite freely after his work was done and over; and, though he had never been off his base, the operation had not had the most soothing effect on his nerves. As he drew near to Doubledeck he felt more than ever his own importance—and the littleness of a small man. In the days that he had been a poor prospector he had also been known as a hard hitter, and at various times he had accumulated the matter for "a record," so that he never was bashful in the expression of his feelings when opportunity seemed to demand.

It happened, also, that the judge was a shareholder in the stage line that brought Doubledeck in communication with the rest of the world. Under such circumstances the remark of Jack was capable of a personal application, and when Armstrong, as though aroused from a reverie, turned fairly toward Haddington, and threw at him the additional, "I don't mean any individual inference," it seemed as though he was answering the mental query that at that moment was uppermost with the judge.

The frown on Haddington's face grew more portentous as the sleepy blue eyes roved lazily over his features with a half-questioning look, and he answered in no very pleasant tone:

"Your inferences will not be apt to hurt any one but yourself; but if there was a little less brass in your cheek you would be apt to keep them to yourself until you got to Doubledeck. People might not feel so free then to express their own."

"Meaning?"

"That gentlemen of your style are generally found under the seat when the road-agents do make a visit. The Copper Caps will be apt to

give us a call before we get to the end of the road, and the boys will be apt to laugh you out of town."

CHAPTER II.

YOU CAN'T 'MOST ALWAYS SOMETIMES TELL.

"I DON'T think that I exactly catch on," responded Jack, softly. "A laugh never hurts any one, and there are few things that I like to hear more than one that comes from the bottom of a pair of number eleven boots. In fact, my motto in life has always been, everything goes and it's all for fun. At the same time, I can recall but few occasions that the laugh was at me, and I am sorry to say that they were generally followed by a funeral. How is Doubledeck—otherwise healthy?"

"For the resident population—yes. For the stranger with frills it is certain death. Probably you have made your last will and testament? Still, that is not a matter of moment. There is no demand there for second-hand clothes; and if we meet the Copper Caps—as we most probably shall—they will not be apt to leave you anything else. If Barney, on the outside, is not guilty of too heavy a load of indiscretion with those firearms you were inquiring about, I think his prospects may not be quite so bad. There is an opening there for men that can swing a pick, or handle a shovel; and he looks as though he was made for the business. We need such men at the Gray Mare Mine, and, in case anything *should* happen, that he arrives at Doubledeck in practicable shape, and he applies to me I shall be happy to do something for him."

The judge had slightly reconstructed his opinion of the sport, and threw a shade of banter into his tone, but, there was not enough of it to pass for an apology; while the question was left open whether he intended a direct insult. Jack looked at the speaker wearily, as though he did not care which of the two it was, or whether it began with the one and wound up with the other.

"Poor Barney! He has been private secretary to a gentleman so long that I am afraid the prospect, if he knew of it, would not be very alluring. Barney!"

"Yis, sor."

"Have we any stock in the Gray Mare Mine, located at Doubledeck?"

"Yis, sor."

"How many shares?"

"Twenty-foive."

"That will do."

The red shock of hair and the little gray eyes, upside-down, that twinkled above it, were drawn upward, and Gentle Jack turned once more to the judge.

"The investment is not immense, but it will do for a starter. It gives a man a right, don't you see, to inquire *into* the property, see *who* is running it, where the water goes to, and all that. Then, if everything turns out to be all right and rosy, one can drop his little pile into the hole in the ground, and follow it himself if he takes a notion, without any one saying that he had better mind his own business. As a company is generally a little particular about who they get in as stockholders, at the send-off, you will scarcely reveal this to the chief of the Copper Caps, should he make his appearance. He might ask me to sign over, and you hardly are anxious for such a transfer."

For a moment Haddington was staggered at the matter of fact statement. Had he totally mistaken his man, and was this some capitalist who had heard of the remarkable developments at the Gray Mare, and was on his way to invest a little fortune in that property?

Hardly. A few small blocks of stock had been placed conditionally where they would do good, but that was away back in civilization, and this man got on at Hard-Up. There could be but little doubt that it was a straight bluff, and that Barney had responded as the sport pulled the rope.

On that supposition he answered, although he could not get into his voice the exact contempt that he was supposed to feel at such a barefaced attempt at imposition:

"It is a pity to misunderstand any one; and it is a pity that your private secretary should make so wild a statement. Probably he got the names mixed. There is a wild-cat company, known—where it is known at all—as the Better Horse. If that is what he means, I don't think even a road-agent would condescend to trifle with the certificates, if he could pick them up by the bushel."

"Barney!"

"Yis, sor."

"Have we any shares in the 'Better Horse?'"

"Yis, sor."

"How many?"

"Twenty-foive hundred."

"That will do. Ah, yes; I remember now. Some of the stuff that I got from the fellow they called Copper Jack, around at the Empire the other night. I thought, then, that it was scarcely worth the taking; but, you know, with me the rule is, everything goes, and it's all for fun."

The conversation had attracted the attention of the other passengers. To some of them Judge

Haddington was known, and they would have backed him against the stranger sport in a contest of brains, wits, money, or anything else.

There were two or three others to whom both men were strangers. The young lady was one of them, and she had so far looked at the two with a very impartial eye. As far as shown by look or action it did not make a particle of difference to her whether they became friends, or cut each other's throats.

But the mention of the name Copper Jack appeared to call her attention more particularly to what had already been said. She looked from one to the other, and her lips moved as though she was on the eve of speaking.

The judge never noticed the glance, but nothing ever escaped the eyes of Mr. Armstrong. He paused at the end of his sentence, although he had evidently intended to add something more to his statement in regard to the Better Horse Mine, and the way in which he came to have an interest in it. Without paying the least attention to what the judge was saying he turned toward Miss Lord, with a nod and a genial smile.

"You were going to remark?"

"Perhaps, nothing. Yet I was trying to recall what you gentlemen had been saying, and to which I had not paid the least attention at the time. The Copper Caps? What is meant by the name?"

"As I understand it they are a gang of gay and festive road-agents, who infest these regions. Their doings furnish half the subject for conversation at Hard-Up, where I have lately been stopping. Very terrible fellows they are if all that is told of them be true. And our friend from Doubledeck seems to think that they will give us a visit before we get to the end of the route—which is extremely likely."

"But they would certainly not rob a defenseless woman?"

"They certainly would. There is no more chivalry about them than there is about the judge, there; or a steam saw-mill. Oh, a very graceless set of ruffians they are, as long as they can have their own way. The time is to be recorded when they allow a dollar to pass when they might have gathered it in. I think they rather prefer coin that belongs to a woman. It is generally easier to get, and there are not likely to be any afterclaps about it."

"Oh, dear! What shall I do?"

The exclamation was not a timid so much as a thoughtful one. It might mean that there was a way of escape if she could only think of which side to turn. It might mean something else.

"There is scarcely much use of your doing anything. My remarks were in regard to woman-kind viewed as defenseless creatures. In case of their appearance on this trip I do not think they would find you defenseless; and do think they would retire empty-handed. There is our friend, the judge; to say nothing of Barney and his Winchester. I can speak for Barney, and give a tolerably accurate guess for the other. They are both terrible fellows when it comes to road-agents."

"And in such company of course you count for nothing?"

The judge, finding that the sport had no intention of attending to him while there was a lady in the case, threw in his remark in the way that he thought would be most likely to turn the channel of the conversation toward himself. He had been traveling with the lady for a good many miles, and she had not as yet spoken a word to him—and not more than a dozen to any one else, so far as he could notice.

"Certainly not," was the frank rejoinder.

"Not to be mentioned in the same breath, at all events. Of course, if there was a hitch in the proceedings, and need for a competent man to start things, there might be a call for your humble servant; but, handling the knights of the snaffle is not supposed to be my peculiar forte—by those who don't know me."

"And how is it with those who do?" sneered the judge.

"Let them speak for themselves. I seldom blow my own trumpet. I don't want to make any one weak; and that is the effect it seems to have on a reasonably steady listener, especially if he starts out with any strongly-expressed doubts as to the capacity of John Armstrong—who is yours, truly."

A very pretty quarrel was developing when the red head from the upper deck appeared once more at the window, and this time without a summons.

"Misther Armstrong!"

"Well, Barney?"

"Sure, an' 'tis comin' Oi think they are now. Wad Oi be afther gettin' av the Winchester riddy?"

CHAPTER III.

BARNEY GETS THE RANGH.

BARNEY'S eyes were keen, and his judgment, fortified by much experience, was not liable to err. The road agents themselves were not visible when he spoke, but he had marked the spot where he believed they would appear, and it was far enough off to give him time to speak. He did not seem to be at all nervous over the news that he was communicating, nor did he ex-

pect that it would produce haste or excitement with his master. It was only an item of information. In the absence of a daily paper he thought it his duty to retail it.

The nearest approach to a frown that Mr. Armstrong was capable of appeared on his face, at the interruption.

"Oh, shoot the agents!" was his exclamation; and then he turned expectantly toward the judge, to hear what answer he was to receive to his introduction, and the rest of the proposition. The judge had made no move toward securing the drop; but there was no telling how soon he might.

But if the announcement did not excite Armstrong, it had its apparent effect on everybody else. For the time his quarrel with the judge was only a secondary matter. Some of the passengers were on their feet in a moment, and the chorus that broke out, just at this time, was a large-sized protest against his careless orders.

Even the judge dropped his dignity a trifle, as he hastily expressed his opinion.

"Hold on, there, for Heaven's sake! If you have no regard for yours or that of the man who trains with you as a servant, have some for the safety of the young lady. If any such infernal folly as that begins there will be death in the coach; and it won't be picking only the fools, either."

"Sorry that the outlook don't agree with you," returned Jack, with the calm smile of innocence that can be the most exasperating of any known expression.

"I was not thinking of any special danger to you when I spoke; I issued instructions on general principles. Of course, if you have any interest in seeing the young lady, as well as the rest of us, robbed by the gentlemen of the copper caps, it is not too late to pass the hint to Barney; but it strikes me that it will not sound well when the boys at Doubledeck hear the story. They may suspect a sleeping partnership with the gentlemen of the road, and investigate accordingly. Shall I pass the word to Barney, and hand my purse over to you as the assistant-treasurer of the gentlemen in the bushes? Speak quickly. Either fight or funk will be good enough for me; but I want a reason why I should do the one if I don't do the other!"

"Lightnings blast you!" shouted the judge, half-springing from his seat. "You have been at it ever since you got into the coach. Take that back, or down you go! If there is any one here who is in as a partner with Copper Cap, it can be no one but you. Hands up, and step out! You can say what you choose to the agents, when you are outside, but we are not going to run any risks with you in here. You are either mad or a worse villain than there is among the outlaws."

"Thanks for the compliment," drawled Jack, without apparently moving a finger. "I have no doubt that you would like to see me outside at their tender mercy, and if I was choosing my ground for a pitched battle, there is where I would prefer to be; but I hate to do anything on compulsion, and so, to be frank with you, I won't go. Hold hard there, judge! Don't you stir. Try to cock that revolver and you are a dead man! Can't you see that I have the drop on you, and that when you pull back your thumb my hammer comes down?"

There was a sharpness about the speech of the sport that was in strong contrast with the easy drawl of a moment before, and showed that it was business he meant now, pure and simple.

Moreover, it was high time the sport was doing something besides talk, for the judge had allowed his temper to get up to fever heat, and in spite of the supposed presence of the road-agents, he was ready to settle the score that Gentle Jack had been so steadily piling up.

The mistake of the judge was in thinking that he could draw and shoot before this languid young man could be ready for him. Probably he did not imagine that with the advantage so squarely on his side there would be any necessity for extreme measures, and did not care to actually flourish the pistol which he had just drawn enough to make its butt visible to his *vis-a-vis*. His thumb was on the hammer, to be sure; but he had not drawn it back yet, as the ears of Armstrong were sharp enough to note; and now it was perhaps too late. The hand of the sport had given a little flirt, and lay across his hip, and slightly turned upward. In the palm of his hand, and hardly visible to any one but Haddington, lay a self-cocking derringer. A finger was on the trigger, and the hammer was gently rising, as the judge, at the warning, looked in that direction.

Haddington had all the nerve that was necessary for a "bad man," but he had judgment along with it, and he knew at a glance that the only thing that could save him, if the sport crooked his finger a little harder, would be a defective cartridge; and they are not often found, nowadays, in the arsenal of men who are ready to risk their lives a few hundred times a year on the certainty of their firearms in case their bluff won't win and lead is called for.

It was a case in which an old hand would see that a backdown was about the only thing that was in order. And, considering the circumstances, it was not such a hard thing to make.

If there was anything like the stormy scene in the near future that Haddington anticipated, this little episode might well be forgotten. His hand dropped away from the weapon, that then slid out of sight, and he nodded gravely.

"Thanks for your warning. I can't say that I care to hasten the end by asking for the shot that you seem to be but too willing to give. If the rest of the passengers are willing to allow you to continue your folly I shall not object. It will mean certain death for some of us, but it may not be for me, after all. I am sorry for the young lady, though, and can only hope that it will prove to have been a false alarm."

"That's hearty, and shows that there is a grain of common sense somewhere about you. Don't you be excited about the young lady. If Barney is unable to take care of the coach I shall make it a personal matter to see that she comes to no harm. Only see, if there is a racket, and what seems to you a chance to get even, that you don't try on any frills. I have a double set of eyes, and can look both ways just as well as not. I shall keep a look out for you, and don't you forget it!"

The sport puzzled the judge more and more. He could not understand why the stranger was determined to push him to the wall, nor could he fathom the mystery of his own repugnance to the young man from the first moment that his eyes fell upon him. Was it instinct, or had they met before? If they had, certainly he would have remembered it; yet strive as he might he could not recall ever having seen that face. He sunk back into his seat without any other answer save a grunt of disgust, and contented himself with glaring around to see what his fellow-passengers thought of this bloodless passage of arms.

The fellow-passengers were not thinking about it at all. They were, for the most part, so absolutely concerned for their own safety that they had paid little if any attention to the continuation of the bicker, after once fairly understanding the warning shouted down by Barney. Some of them were engaged in hiding away their valuables, or such part of them as they thought would not be missed; while others were too excited to think of even that precaution. This was the case with the outsiders as well as the insiders: and of them all there were but three who showed no signs of nervousness.

Some excuse might be found for those who did in the fact that the waiting is generally more trying than the fight itself. The Copper Caps had done some very nasty work when they had been resisted; and, though the scared ones were not thinking of resistance, it was not certain in their minds that they would be unmolested if they even handed over their valuables without protest.

The sharp crack of a Winchester from the upper deck caused what might almost be called a general start. Gentle Jack was watching the judge with the same smile that had all along been on his face, and not a muscle moved at the sound; but the rest were more or less frightened, Miss Lord apparently the least, however.

The first crack was followed by another, and still another. Barney was working his gun as fast as the lever would throw the cartridges to place; and in the midst of the fusillade the stage came to a sudden halt.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STAGE ROLLS ON.

WHAT Barney Kain was going to do had been of less interest to those who were just at good supporting distance than it was to those who could not see the Irishman. The former had heard little, if any, of the conversation with Mr. Armstrong in regard to the use of the rifle which they had hardly noticed. As they did not think that an outside passenger would be so wild as to start a resistance to such a formidable gang as the Copper Caps, they were all more concerned, either about their prospective losses, or in regard to the reception the outlaws would meet with from below. They heard Barney's warning, to be sure; and as the spot they were nearing was one well fitted for an ambushade, they accepted it as correct without further question, every man preparing to look out for number one.

The first crack of the rifle was an astonisher. No one had happened to see Barney handling the weapon, for he did not fairly raise it to his shoulder, but took a snap shot from the level of the roof on which the repeater had been lying. After that, however, he held the rifle to his shoulder as he directed a stream of bullets into the bushes.

The driver was an old hand at the business, and had been held up more times than he had fingers and toes. As yet he had seen no one, and had received no order to halt. If he had been left to himself he would have kept up the swinging trot at which he was rounding the turn when the alarm was given. But some one kicked over the brake-bar, while a nervous individual, who sat behind him, reached over, and, with a howl, snatched the reins partially from his hands, at the same time giving a vicious tug at the horses, that brought them up all standing.

When every one was so excited it was a wonder that the equines were not wild, but, some-

how, they were willing and ready to stop. Probably they had smelt gunpowder enough to know that when "hands up" was to be shouted the quicker they halted the less likelihood there would be of some one dropping a leader.

And while the passengers were praying or cursing; while Black Jimmy, the driver, was confining himself exclusively to the latter; and while the horses were fretting and making ready to plunge away again, two men leaped out, almost at the horses' heads. As they were masked, and held firearms in their hands, the supposition was that they were of the road-agent gang, and there was a howl on their discovery; but, just when their arms came up, there was a pistol-shot from the stage, and as one staggered at the report, there was a sharp whistle from the clump of bushes into which Barney had been so industriously pumping lead.

At the whistle the two men vanished as quickly as they had appeared, the one who was unhurt catching his comrade around the waist and swinging him back into the concealment from which they had emerged.

"Now, let her roll!" exclaimed Jack Armstrong, thrusting his head out of the window. "You didn't waste all your shots, Barney! There is nothing like beginning in time. Just put yourself down for an extra twenty on next pay-day."

By this time Jimmy had the lines back in his hands, and he wasted no time in putting into effect the suggestions. With a preliminary swing to gather force he brought the long lash of his whip down in a snaky swish that covered the four horses in one comprehensive cut, and at the same time shouted a vicious, "G'lang!" that started them off at a keen jump.

In spite of the opinion of Armstrong, there was no certainty that the Copper Caps had beaten a retreat; while the appearance of the two men was an undoubted proof that a swoop had been planned. Down covered everybody on the upper deck save the driver and Barney Kain; and ostrich-like they kept their faces covered until the point of danger was passed. Then, every one drew a long breath, and the stage rolled smoothly on.

For the next ten minutes no one said anything that amounted to much. Those who had made exhibitions of themselves thought it was hardly time as yet to begin to bluster: Miss Lord was silent on general principles; Barney did not generally start a conversation when his employer was around; and Armstrong had retired from the field with the gentle smile on his face a little more pronounced than ever. The result of the affair spoke louder for him than any words that he could utter.

If any passenger had been wise enough to divine his thoughts, the result might have been a surprise. Johnny was in reality a discontented young man; and the cause of his mental trouble was, that he could not understand the judge.

Haddington had overdone his part—and the question was, what that part could be? The alarm over the visit of the road-agents was too great to be genuine, and why had he put it on? Certainly, not simply for the purpose of keeping up the antagonism which had so speedily developed upon the appearance of the sport. Yet, though he had made the charge clearly enough to be understood by any one who had a guilty conscience, he did not believe, now the affair was over, that Haddington was in league with the Copper Caps.

"Just as like as not there is a pair of us, puzzling over the same thing," was the mental conclusion of the sport, after he had time to think it all over.

"It is a clear case that he don't like me; and I can very truthfully return the compliment. Picked him out as a man I wouldn't like as soon as my eyes dropped on him, and the more I see of him the more I am sure first impressions were reliable. If I don't shoot him before we get to Doubledeck, he will be apt to try his best to have me planted as soon as possible after reaching that model burg. And the trouble is that I have said too much. Always was my way. Must talk if I die for it. And I've died numerous deaths already—in the minds of gentlemen to whom my conversation was addressed. If I say much of anything to this individual, it will look as though I was determined to have a misunderstanding, whether or no; and if such a misunderstanding should come, and the termination be as fatal as usual, my stay at Doubledeck might not be just as comfortable as I could wish for. I won't take water, or anything else; but if he has sense enough to lead blind cripples to water, there won't be any more foolishness till we get to the town where the cold deck is the rule, and they double-team the stranger on the chance that he may be a better man than he looks to be.

"By the way, gents, who fired that shot? I generally keep my eyes open, and see about all that is going, but I missed that, and I must say that it was what finished the business. Barney, at long range, did some fine work; but dropping one of the advance, that was out hunting a horse, made them all weary. It showed what they might expect when the issue was fairly joined."

The latter part was spoken aloud, and without seeming to do it, Jack looked hard at the judge. He hardly suspected him, and wanted to see if he would take the credit for what was really a neat piece of work.

No one answered, and no one looked conscious; but, with remarkable unanimity the glances of all were turned in his direction. Even Miss Lord shot a quick look at him, that seemed to say that he might be in earnest, but it was more than likely he was fishing for a compliment, or else wanted to be sure that no one saw him handle his weapon.

"Humph! They are all mighty modest," he thought to himself.

"I didn't do it, unless it was in a dream; and I thought that I was very wide awake. They want to put it my way, though; and I sha'n't kick as long as they don't talk any louder about it than they are doing now. All the same, it lies between the lady and the judge, with the lady for choice. If the judge could have done that kind of work he would have been trying some of it on me. Really, the more I see of her the more I am convinced that she is a damsel worth the knowing; and if she gives me a chance I will cultivate her when we get to Doubledeck. Something tells me that she and the judge will be at outs before long, and that I will be taking her side in the discussion."

If it could have been known it would have been strange to note how exactly Haddington was following the same line of thought in regard to Jack Armstrong and the lady. In his mind there was a glimpse of lively times ahead, and he too was calculating on what might happen when they had once reached Doubledeck.

From that time the conversation that went on in that vehicle was of a rather subdued nature. Half a dozen men were badly dissatisfied with themselves, while Armstrong and his man were in no mood to push their opinions on unwilling ears. Even Barney was not lionized as much as he might have been. His companions on the top from time to time stared admiringly at him and his Winchester, but as he was reticent they did not care to intrude upon him and his thoughts.

For a wonder, Barney, though an Irishman, was not inclined at any time to be loquacious; and when Jack Armstrong was in hearing distance he was silent, on the principle that one must not quarrel with his bread and butter. Gentle Jack did not approve of promiscuous talk. He reserved the right for that to himself.

But if Barney did not talk it was not because he was not on good terms with himself. His face was unclouded, and from time to time he softly hummed to himself a song, the chorus of which ran.

"Swate Peggy McGlural,
Ri tural,
Ouch! Howld me my dariint, Oi'm kilt."

CHAPTER V. COLD COMFORT.

THE stage came into Doubledeck on that evening, and without meeting the Copper Caps again; or being the scene of any further unpleasantness. When it drew up in front of the "Home" Hotel, the passengers all got out quietly, those who lived in the town scattering to their homes, and the visitors following the landlord, who had hustled out to greet the new arrivals. If Black Jimmy had not dropped into the bar-room to take his whisky as straight as usual it is possible that the raid on the coach—or the intended raid—would not have been mentioned that night. Miss Lord and the sport would not have broached the subject, and Barney did as the latter winked.

But the veteran of the ribbons had not got over the indignation that he had been smothering along the road; and now, when it could not involve him in any unpleasantness with a part of his cargo, he blurted out the whole truth as he had seen it. He might have told the story so that it would have been in uglier shape for the passengers who had shown so much pusillanimity, but it was bad enough anyhow; and made Barney a regular hero, and his master the next best in the lot.

"An' ter think, by blazes! that that thar young lady hed more pluck than all ther rest of 'em put tergether, savin' them two ez I war tellin' about. She didn't scream—not once. Nary! She war jest ez sereen ez I war tell ther cussoc ez war skeered outen ther wits tried ter capture ther coach, an' hand it over ter Copper Cap. About that time I war so mad I war'n't seein' nothin', an' I can't say how things went; but you kin jest bet she war better than ther best, an' thar warn't no weepin' an' wailin' frum her."

"But, Jimmy," asked one of the interested ones, "you don't mean to say there was a real down fight with the Copper Caps, that didn't leave any more marks on the hearse? Why, the time Lame Lon got his gruel, and there was more than a dozen stiff on both sides, altogether, they raked in the wealth aboard, and the old wagon looked as though it was a patent sifter, all ready, in running order."

"Wal, you see ther fight, as I've bin a-tryin'

ter tell yer, war nigh to all on one side. Ther Irish gerloot's such a hummer thet he hed 'em purty much surrounded afore they rightly got ter goin'. He did ther shootin', and ther agents did ther tumblin'. That way thar warn't much room fur damidge to ther hearse. Thar war two did git nigh ez fure ez ther leaders' heads; but this other chap downed 'em so quick it would 'a' made yer head swim ter see it. That last bu'sted ther hull combernashun; an' by that time I got my ribbons back in my fists, an' we sailed on through."

Jimmy had somehow imbibed the idea that the sport had fired the shot that came from the inside, and as there was no one else at hand to dispute the matter it went down on the sport's record to stay. So far as the public at large went there was never any open correction.

"And who in thunder is the little sport? He looks as though he might have the sand for such a tussle if he was driv to it; but he ain't set up for a real bad man, neither. Him an' the judge could train together for looks; and when he got out I thought it might be a side pard that Haddington had picked up in his travels."

"Side pard, nothin'," broke in one of the men who had been on the inside, and having wandered in had hitherto been remarkably silent while Jimmy was giving the pedigree of his cargo.

"They don't pull in ther same boat, nobow. They had it hot and heavy all along, an' I reckon ef ther Copper Caps hadn't clipped, just ez it war gittin' interestin'; thet thar would 'a' bin blood on ther floor afore that wagon got ter Doubledeck. Thar will be fun amazin' afore them two are done with each other, an' ef yer wants ter see sport yer don't want to furgit it."

This opened up a side subject for conversation that had not hitherto been broached, and as Black Jimmy did not know much about what had been going on inside of the coach he no longer had the floor entirely to himself. It was almost as interesting as the dash of the road-agents, and promised excitement in the future, with a chance for everybody to see the fun. There was at once a renewed curiosity to see the sport, and if he had desired to be a man of mark in Doubledeck, Gentle Johnny could not have taken a better way to accomplish his desire than he did when he entered into a bicker with the magnate of the Gray Mare Mine.

While this conversation was going on at the Home the judge was having something to say that did not seem so pleasant, from the scowl that was on his face, and the angry ring in his voice. From the hotel he had hurried away directly to the mine. Work was no doubt over for the day, but he expected to find his manager, Simon McCarthy, there. McCarthy bunked in the cabin at the mouth of the shaft, and generally took his meals there, though he sometimes patronized the Home or one of the restaurants.

As the judge had a walk of a mile before reaching the mine there was ample time for his angry passions to cool; but somehow, the longer he thought over the affairs of the afternoon the deeper was his wrath. He caught sight of a glimmer of light from the cabin some time before reaching the Gray Mare, but it is doubtful if it gave him any satisfaction. It is even likely that it was the other way. When a man is in a right down bad humor it is a satisfaction to have something more to grumble at. He gave a great bang at the door, which happened to be closed, and then thrust it open before McCarthy had time to finish his shout to come in.

Once inside and he found himself covered by the revolver which Simon had promptly produced when he understood in what haste the man who knocked seemed bound to come. The manager had made some enemies in his time, as he was well aware; and did not intend to be caught napping.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he coolly remarked, as he slowly dropped his weapon back to its ordinary resting-place, and looked keenly at the judge, to see that his hands were empty.

"Didn't know but what it might be some one on business. If I had been one of your lightning kind to shoot I would have tried you one for good luck anyhow. It's a shade reesky, intruding on a man so rapid like. I wouldn't do it, judge; I really wouldn't do it. You hit him some time when he's nervous, and looking for some one, and he won't take time for a second glance before he blows you cold. You don't know how much danger you were in for just a trifle of a second."

"Didn't know that you ever got nervous, or I wouldn't have risked it of course. How have things been going here? Everything all right?"

By this time the two men were shaking hands and the judge was looking around to make sure that they were alone.

"Right as they can be. Things look as though we had struck it richer even than it seemed when you went away. If you have arranged for any one to come on an inspecting tour we will have something besides salt to show. Fact is, I begin to think that it is a mistake to let any one in from the outside. If it could all be kept in the family there is a chance for the Gray Mare to turn out a regular bonanza."

"That's all right; but, it takes a little fortune to work a bonanza; and if the bottom was to drop out about the time we had put in what we were worth, that would be the end of us. If it turns out as good as I hope, a controlling interest will be good enough for me; and your little stack of shares will bring in as much as you could get out of the whole if we had to struggle along until we cleared enough to put things on a booming basis. I am ready to take chances when I don't see the way to doing better; but in this, half a loaf may be better than all the bread. The thing is in shape. The sharps they sent down to look things over before I went away gave a better report even than I did, and the business is as good as done. It will not be very long before Doubledeck will have a boom; for of course, if the Gray Mare turns out as we expect, there will be a waking up all along the line."

"Oh, you bet there will. I always did say that very thing. But I reckon you didn't trudge all the way out here to tell me that. What is it? What's on your mind? You ain't grizzling over what I said to you when you came in? Your face looks as black as a thunder-cloud."

"Of course not. It needed a warning of that kind to bring me a little to my senses. I guess I came out because I was in a rank bad humor, and wanted to talk it over before I made a fool of myself. I don't want to have the top of my head blown off just now, but for the last few hours I have been pretty near willing to risk it. I have had a mighty uncomfortable time, and I don't fancy the way things are looking at all."

"Hello! Something gone wrong? I thought things were too lovely to last. What's up? Anything about the title?"

Haddington gave a little, harsh laugh.

"Title be hanged! We are in, and I would like to see the world at large get us out. No; I met a man that I don't like, and the man don't like me. Then, there is a woman who somehow seems to be coming into the case, and altogether I wouldn't wonder if there was going to be a mixed time."

"Give us the particulars, then, if that is what you came out for. If they don't show that there is something in the way, I should say, shoot the man and make love to the woman."

The very remembrance of his story, as he told it, was enough to doubly deepen the scowl on the judge's face; but he gave a fair enough account of his adventures for the day, and then waited to hear what McCarthy had to say.

"Gentle Jack, for a hundred!" was Simon's exclamation, as the other ceased speaking.

"Maybe you had better let some other man try to do the shooting. From all accounts it's not so easy a job as I would like a dear pard of mine to try to carry. He's little, and as soft as silk; but double-distilled lightning on the draw. And when he pulls trigger he knows where his lead is going. What in the name of all creation put you up to a racket with him?"

"Then you would not like to take the thing off of my shoulders?"

"No, I wouldn't," responded Simon, speaking very frankly.

"I wouldn't even care to try a sitting shot at him from among the bushes. He has the luck of the Old Boy to back him, and the chances are too strong that he would lay me out. If one had half a dozen men that he could rely on, and could get up a regular riot, there might be a chance, by taking him from all sides at once. If it must be, I think I could have him downed in that way; but, to tell the truth, I would sooner let him alone."

"And so would I, now that I have had a chance to think it all over; but I am afraid that he won't let us alone. The tough part is that he has, or says he has, twenty-five shares in the Gray Mare. Perhaps he is working for himself, and perhaps some one else has sent him down to work for him. It's the easiest way to set up a game of freeze-out. A corpse don't want to worry about even as good a thing as this."

"That's so!" exclaimed McCarthy, bringing his fist down upon the table at which he was seated with a vigorous thump.

"He is a man that will bear watching, though I never heard that he would shoot from behind, or take pay for laying out a man that was in somebody else's road. We'll watch him, and if the frills develop into something of that kind I'll have the gang at the mine at him, if it takes a thousand dollars. And how about the woman?"

"Never mind the woman. That is an affair that I want to manage myself. But keep a close watch on this Gentle Jack, as you call him, and if he makes a move and it costs a heap when he goes down, I will stand all expenses."

"Make yourself easy. I have as much at stake as you have, and I don't propose that he or any other man shall get away with it. Better take a bite of supper, if you haven't been there yet; and then we will go into town together, and try to see how the land lies."

CHAPTER VI.

SHADOWS THAT SPOKE.

If Gentle Jack had sought Doubledeck with any design of meeting its sports over the green

cloth, he seemed in no great haste to put that design into execution. From the stage he went to the supper-table; and after that he disappeared, so far as the waiting population was concerned. McCarthy and the judge looked around at the various sporting resorts at which they had an idea that he might put in an appearance; but he was nowhere to be found. Even careful inquiries at the Home resulted in nothing definite. He was not known to be in the house, if the word of the landlord could be believed; and he certainly was not in the little box that was by courtesy called his room.

The judge actually drew a long breath of relief as the two turned away from the hotel.

"I didn't think of it; but it begins to look as though he might have seen that he had bit off more than he could chew, and bolted. The best of men lose their nerve sometimes, and if he got hold of any one here to look for items he would hear enough to show him what sort he was dealing with. What do you think about it?"

The judge spoke in a low, and somewhat anxious tone. If this explanation of his was not the true one then it was as likely that the sport had some scheme on hand, even at this early moment, and it would be well to be on guard.

"Don't you worry about his bolting. He's not one of that kind. I am more afraid that he has started off on the war-path, Injun fashion, and the first sign you hear or see of him will be when he begins to shoot. And it's not very likely that you would hear that, either. When you are down—if you have given me the straight story—he may leave fast enough, for he's not the kind that likes to run the risk of climbing a tree if he can get around it; but till he settles that little score you were fool enough to open, you can bet he will be around Doubledeck, somewhere. The only question is, how is he going to come at you? He may take his guns—and, as I told you, he is sure death with them—or he may try something else. Man alive! he is a holy terror; and I wish he would come out into the open. I would sooner risk a shot than have him laying back in the dark."

"Especially as the shot would be at me," said Haddington, with some bitterness.

"It is true, you would have the privilege of pulling on the rope shortly after, but I cannot see how that would help things, unless you want me to go over the range."

"Correct as usual. I do make mistakes of that kind sometimes; but you know, after all, it is a slip of the tongue—sound, and nothing else. Don't pick one up so suddenly. I am only trying to make you understand that you have a bad one on the trail, that gets even with any one he has a flare with, and don't seem to half try. I don't see how you came to make the mistake you did, and I don't understand why he met you more than half way. It makes me think more than ever that it was no bluff that he was giving you about the Gray Mare, and that he came down to look into it. If that is the case, it is pretty certain the party that sent him don't want you. Maybe if you thought a little that would show you who is behind him."

The judge shook his head gravely. It is true he might guess where any actual interest that Armstrong had must have come from, but it would take some time to find out how many hands it passed through before it reached the sport. Meanwhile, whatever mischief was intended would be done. He had every confidence in McCarthy, but somehow did not care to call his attention to certain other suspicions that he kept to himself. When he spoke, it was in a different tone altogether.

"I guess I have been a fool, but I was hardly myself—nerves a little unstrung, you understand. It may be that things were not as bad as I have been making them, and that nothing further will come out of the flare-up, especially when he finds out who he has been dealing with. We had better take it easy for a day or so, and see how it is going to be. Of course, if anything should happen to him, I should not weep over it; but I don't know, since I have got a little cooler, that I care to bring any one else in until I see that safety requires it. He will hardly attack me without giving me some show. If he don't, I can hold my own row; if he does, there will be enough of the boys handy to see that he goes down shortly after. I feel my wits coming back to me, Simon, and I hope you won't remember that you saw me all broke up in the early part of the evening. It would hurt me with the boys bad enough if they should get to know it. I can explain things as far as they went to suit myself; but this last was something else."

"No apology needed with me, old man; and of course you know that I don't talk about matters in the family. I understand that you have been on the go for some time, and I shouldn't wonder if you were thinking how to get rid of me, so that you can retire to your virtuous couch. What is the use of being bashful? Good-night! I'll take a turn around town, and if I pick up anything will let you know all about it in the morning, or sooner. I want to see the man, anyhow; and there may be a chance to get eyes on him later on."

Simon had hit the truth pretty closely, and was not at all offended by it. The two understood each other too thoroughly for that, and they

separated without further debate, the judge going directly to his room, while McCarthy proceeded to put into execution his plan of a turn around town.

In a place like Doubledeck that meant a good deal for a man who was starting out by himself. There were lonesome spots, and men that were willing to take advantage of them. There were greater ruffians than McCarthy, who would not hesitate to fly at any game if they thought it was worth the plucking. When men went out to make a night of it, they generally traveled in pairs; and there had been one or two very good men laid out while going it alone.

McCarthy never thought of this, however; and if he had, would have laughed at it as a bit of nervous nonsense that he had caught from the judge. He did not even think of giving a glance around to see if the parting was being noticed by any suspicious individuals. If he had done so it is barely possible that he would have caught a glimpse of a dark figure stealing away, that it might have been as well for him to have investigated.

The figure belonged to a low, squat ruffian, who had been near enough to overhear a good part of the conversation between the judge and his right-hand man; and the look of positive hate that was on his face might not have been so pleasant for Simon to see, bad man as he was. There is no foe more dangerous than a skulking one.

The fellow did not go far before halting. Then he stood as silent as a statue, keeping a watch over his shoulder on McCarthy.

In a moment he was joined by a mate, very like to him in build and general appearance, who whispered as he came near:

"It's all right, Tommy. It's me. Did yer ketch on ter what they war a-chinnin' about?"

"You bet! Ef ther' war any truth in what they war a-sayin', trouble's a-comin' home ter roost with 'em. Jedge are in a peck ov it over a sport ez hez it in fur him, an' I reckon, ef they meet, fur are goin' ter fly in some d'reckshun."

"But you ain't goin' ter let that stand in ther way ef we kin git ther chance we bin a-lookin' fur?"

"In course not. Sime are a-goin' ter take a turn 'round town, an' yer knows what that means, when he sez it. Ther chance we war lookin' fur are mighty nigh in sight, an' yer wants ter brace yerself. Sure no one seen yer in town ter-night?"

"Nary soul; an' ef they hed they wouldn't hev knowed me, nohow. Ef you kin say ther same we're safe, no matter what happens."

"Safe she are, then. Guess he's 'bout fur enough ahead now. We'll foller, an' you tread ez ef you war goin' over eggs. We may hev a chance ter fix him afore he strikes ther first cover."

"No sich good look ez that, but ef ther chance should come we'll be thar. Hyer we go!"

Very silently they dropped into the wake of McCarthy, and followed without making the least sound. If the mine boss had looked behind him ever so carefully it is doubtful if he would have caught a glimpse of the flitting figures; and yet they were watching his movements like hungry wolves, and were ready to seek any cover from which they might make an unexpected attack without danger of other witnesses.

Fortunately for him the evening was young, and there was more or less movement on the streets. Otherwise there might have been opportunities of the kind that the two men were waiting for. As it was, Simon strolled into the "Daisy" before they had found it safe or convenient to get any nearer than when they first started in on the trail.

The Daisy Saloon was all that its name implied; and was one of the first places a sport was apt to steer for when he intended to make a night of it around town. It was natural that Simon should drop in there, whether he was looking for the stranger sport, or whether he was only out in search of amusement. It was his headquarters when in the saddle, and if there was any place that he could get information, such as he desired, without his inquisitiveness attracting the attention of the wrong parties, it would be there.

There was no token of any wild excitement about the place, and yet McCarthy had hardly entered when he became aware that there was something in the wind that was more than usually interesting. He looked a little further than the bar—at which the throng was somewhat slimmer than usual—and saw that a game was in progress that was gathering spectators, who were all in a state of high good humor. In that direction he immediately drifted, and found that if he had not discovered the man for whom he had started in search he had done the next best thing. From the brief description given him by the judge he recognized Barney Kain on the instant.

"Humph! He has struck business, with a large B. If he don't tangle himself before he gets through with that crowd it will be because he has lost considerable of the freshness the judge reported he was showing on the way down. It may be that Armstrong has salted

him well before turning him loose; but I am afraid that even salt won't save him."

And with some such reflections as these Simon edged up toward the table, and silently watched the game, that seemed to have been for some time in progress.

CHAPTER VII.

A SINGULAR INTERVIEW.

JACK ARMSTRONG had been applying himself to business during his stay at Hard-Up with such closeness that he had hardly averaged three hours' sleep out of the twenty-four, and when he found himself at Doubledeck, and free from any entangling alliances, he thought there was never a better opportunity to make up for lost time.

From the supper-table he went straight to his room; and when the chance to sleep was before him, he suddenly found that he was not as sleepy as he had thought. He lit a cigar and threw himself lazily on the one chair that the room afforded, and as it was at the open window he looked dreamily out into the gathering night.

It would have been a relief to Judge Haddington if he could have known his thoughts. Perhaps it would have been a surprise, too, since the judge never once figured in them. Such little affairs as that of the afternoon were of too frequent occurrence with Gentle Jack to make a very deep impression on his mind. He seldom bore malice, and was willing to wait until the time came to consider what should be his course at the next meeting with a man with whom he had differed in opinion. Perhaps, if he had needed a subject for thought, the judge would have passed muster just then; but, without any hesitation, his mind went out toward the handsome young lady he had met in the stage.

Very strange it seemed to him; but, now that she was not in view it appeared that he was much more interested in her than he had thought when he had but to turn his eyes in her direction to see her. There was something familiar about her face as he remembered it. He had not noticed it at the time, but he wondered why this resemblance had not attracted his attention at his very first sight of her. Who it was that she looked like was a puzzle, but he was certain that it was some one with whom in time past he had been very well acquainted. The more he thought of it the more positive he was that he ought to recognize her features, and yet the more unsettled he was as to who she might resemble.

Once on that track, and, after the manner of a wakeful man, he could think of nothing else. He began to go over in his mind the names and faces of men whom he had met; yet without result. The longer he thought the less likelihood did there seem of his being able to recall the man he wanted. He could have sworn that half a dozen times the name was just on his lips, and the face just passing before his eyes. As Jack was very obstinate when he once got started it is possible that he would have puzzled over the matter until daylight if he had been left undisturbed; but, just when it seemed to him that the remembrance he was striving for was drifting within his grasp there came a low knock at his door.

The sound startled him, for he could have sworn that it was not done by masculine hands. His feet dropped away from the window-sill where they had been resting, and as he arose hastily he exclaimed: "Come in!"

The door opened silently, and he could feel rather than see a figure standing on the threshold.

"Just a moment. I blew out my light and was sitting here in the dark, enjoying a good night smoke. I will have the candle going in a moment."

"It is not necessary," was the response. "I recognize your voice. You are Mr. Armstrong, for whom I was looking. I do not care to have any one know of this interview, and perhaps it will be as well not to have a light. I believe that I can trust you to say nothing of the meeting."

"Positively, I am dumb. If it is necessary I can be deaf also. In that case, however, I would hardly be worth much as a counselor. I am at your service. What is it?"

He had recognized the voice of the lady in turn, and knew that his visitor was the fair passenger of the afternoon.

She came in quietly, and closed the door after her. Her steps made no sound as she crossed the room and took her station on the other side of the window. Not till then did she utter another word. Then she spoke in a low tone.

"You are scarce a stranger to me, since I have heard your name mentioned often; and always as that of a man who feared nothing, and could be trusted to the end. Do you know a man by the name of Elmer Conroy?"

Here was a surprise. Of all the names he had recalled while sitting there in the dark, that was the one he had not thought of; yet, when he heard it now it was with a start, and a wonder that he had not thought of it before, even if he knew not how this young lady could be interested in it.

"Did I know him? Most certainly—from my youth up. What was he to you?"

"Why do you say, was? Better to ask what he is to me now!"

"Unless I might hazard the guess that you are his widow I know not what else I could say. Elmer Conroy has been dead longer than I care to remember. It will always be a personal grievance that I did not have the opportunity to do more to assist him over the range. I hope that I do not shock you, but in such cases I have always found straightforward talk to be the best in the deck."

"You do not shock me, because I know that you are mistaken. He still lives, and I am here to meet him. He will be with me soon, and then I will be without the power to help myself—and little enough of it do I have, even now. Tell me, then, you who know him so well, *who he is.*"

"To speak frankly, and put it in a few words, he was the most consummate villain that ever drew breath. If you want advice I would say that, if he really is living, the less you have to do with him the better. At the same time, I cannot believe that he is this side of the hereafter. My own eyes did not rest on his corpse, but the proof that he went down to his death was enough to satisfy any reasonable man. Why, I saw him go. And from that day to this no other person save yourself has ever hinted that he halted at the brink, and then came back. If I had thought so, I would have been looking a little out for my own safety—and perhaps for a chance to hold level on him. As long as he lives there will be certain unsettled scores between us, that can only be closed up when one or the other of us goes over the range. If I didn't cause his death, Elmer knows that I tried hard enough, and got him in the box at least, even if he wasn't planted. He would shoot me on sight, if he thought there wouldn't be a hemp reward waiting for him when it was all over. And I guess he would run pretty long risks, anyhow, if he got me in front of him. Thanks for your information—if it is reliable. I shall sleep with one eye open—and when I say that much you can know that he is a bad man from 'way back, and one that can be dangerous as the worst."

"Thank you for your plain speaking. But do you know if he was a cousin to—to Stephen Lord?"

Again the face of Mr. Armstrong would have expressed surprise, if there had been a light by which to read it. He hesitated, and his answer came slowly:

"Um! Ah! All that matter is a little before my time, and I don't see your interest, exactly. For the sake of argument I might say that perhaps he was. What then? Proceed."

"Oh, I know not what to say. Am I to be his victim, or his accomplice? Shall I escape him; will we triumph; or will we both go down together? He promised me that there should be no bloodshed, yet he has broken, or tried to break, that promise. But for me there was a man in the stage to-day who would now be a corpse. Pity that I did not have the chance that for a moment I thought was coming. Just then, I could have brought down the chief outlaw, himself. I am Stephen Lord's daughter! At first I thought only to find my father. Then this man met me and told me that father was dead. Now, I am fighting for my rights. Perhaps I shall get them; but I would willingly lose them all to be quit of Elmer forever."

"It strikes me that you are making a bid for the use of my revolvers. If you feel that way why don't you drop him? This is a free and easy sort of country. When a man or a woman gets tired of a pard they just say, 'Good by, John,' and that is the end of it, unless John gets his back up and begins to shoot. If you are not ready for that, you don't belong here, and ought to change headquarters."

"Gladly would I take your advice; but I cannot. Is it witchcraft? I believe that if there were a thousand miles between us I would answer to his thoughts. You may not understand this, but—"

"Oh, yes, I do. It runs in the family. They were all some given to witchcraft. At any rate, I wouldn't care to put myself within the range of his eyes and tongue if I had to give him the chance to use them both before I got in my own work. But you have not yet told me why you come to me. What is it that you want?"

"I know not. Perhaps to warn you; perhaps to beg you to tell the man who holds that which was my father's, though not as from me, to look to his safety. I shudder to think of what may come; yet I cannot draw back. If I knew that you were going to slay me this minute I could not help but feel that you were about to give me a blessed release. And if Conroy was here, by my side, I might fight you, for him, to the death. You have settled what was a lingering doubt, and so this visit has turned out to be in his favor. I have warned you that he still lived, and that he hates you worst of all in this world. In that you may not feel impatient that I have come."

"I suspect that you are a little off in the upper story—Conroy's victims usually are before he gets through with them. I am afraid you are an arrant impostor, after all; and that if you are a *victim* you are a very willing one. You may rest easy in your mind, if I have mis-

judged you. After what you have told me in regard to Conroy, I shall hold myself in readiness for almost anything to happen, and probably before I get through, Conroy will be perforated. I would advise you to let Haddington and the Gray Mare alone, if that is what you are driving at, and for the rest, I'll see you later, and let you know what I think about it."

"If I am playing you foully I do not know it. I have warned you against the man that I knew was coming; and now I feel that he is here. Whatever else you may have had to say should have been said to-night. After this, who knows if we will ever meet as anything but foes. Good-night!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEAD COME BACK.

THE lady vanished as silently as she had come, and Jack Armstrong was almost ready to believe that she was, or had been, a creature of his imagination. He knew well enough that he had been in a mental condition that was strained and unnatural. What had caused it he could not say; and to tell the truth, he was a little afraid to try to guess. If he had been indulging deeply in the flowing bowl, he might have accounted for it in that way. As he had been unusually abstemious for some time, he was almost ready to believe that he had gone to the other extreme.

"I certainly must have been dreaming," reflected Jack, as he vainly listened to catch the sound of the lady's light footsteps, or the closing of her door.

"If I had been awake I wouldn't have listened to that sort of nonsense from a perfect stranger. I was thinking of the young lady of the stage, when I fell asleep, and evolved the rest out of my inner consciousness. Ha, ha! What kind of foolishness have I been guilty of, anyhow?"

But, though Armstrong said all that to himself, and yawned, and stretched himself like one who had been asleep, he could not convince himself that it had been a dream; nor did he really want to.

The cigar at the open window no longer had power to quiet his nerves. He felt a longing to move. He looked out at the darkness that seemed to invite him. When he saw the form of a female moving away from the house, with a swift though somewhat stealthy motion, he hesitated no longer. As the figure was well muffled, he could not with certainty recognize it; but he was pretty sure that it belonged to his late visitor. She might lead him to Conroy, so that he could be convinced; and at all events he could have an opportunity to think the matter over. He put on his hat again, and quietly made his way out into the open air.

By that time the woman had disappeared. He looked around, and seeing nothing of her, naturally took the direction in which she was going when he observed her from the window.

The hour was later than he had supposed. The saloons were in full blast; as he passed near a dance-house he paused for a moment, half tempted to enter. Then he shook his head. "Not to-night. I am certainly off color, and it was just as well I let up a little. It was time I was taking a rest. But, I swear, I have no use for the lady of the stage. She is working for Conroy, no doubt, and hates him sure enough, just as everybody that ever had anything to do with the intelligent fiend always did, and that without hope; but, when the time comes to act, and he has her under his eye, she will act as Elmer pulls the strings."

So he reasoned, and while he was thinking he extended his stroll further than he intended. He was recalled to the outside world and every-day affairs, by hearing a sharp voice utter the well-known, mischief-meaning words, "Hands up!"

By instinct his hands flashed to his weapons, and before a word could be added he had them out and pointing in the direction from whence the sound had appeared to proceed. He did not pull trigger, however, since he saw that his muzzles covered nothing more animate than the stump of an oak tree. Whoever had hailed him was safely out of harm's way for the present? While he was thinking this, and glancing in search of cover for himself, he heard once more the cry, "Hands up!"

This time the sound came from immediately behind him. He did not even glance in that direction, however. He understood that they had him surrounded.

"That's the way to take it," broke in the first speaker. "You are a man of sense, without a doubt. If you had tried to squirm around so as to look all both ways to once you would have heard the boys that are at the other points of the compass. We have you, sure, and if you tried to damage one man the other three would be getting in their work. Now then, to return to our mutton. Hands up, and it's the last time of asking."

"Very sorry to differ with you—always providing that you are in earnest about your very modest request," drawled Jack, his hands in his pockets, and not a sign of tremor in his tones.

"Three times round and out, you know. Couldn't think of giving in on only the second shout. Indeed, I am of the opinion that I never

give in at all; but if you talked long enough you might convince me that I am mistaken about that. What is your idea, anyhow? I've heard those words before, but it strikes me that I never exactly caught on to their meaning."

"You're smart, but I reckon you'll find that smartness don't agree with you, if you keep on at that gait. We might have had you down long ago if we hadn't wanted to give you a chance to get through the mill without getting marked. Why, one of the boys could chuck a club at you that would knock you west end crooked, and the thing couldn't be heard a rod."

"Chuck ahead, if that will do you any good. But if you are inclined to be so tender of my feelings, why not just play my hands are up, and go on with your little circus, anyhow. There is no danger of my beginning to squirm as long as I don't see a good chance to come out ahead on the game, and if you are as shrewd as you think you are, you will be able to see I don't get the opportunity that I admit I will be looking for. If that don't suit you, down me, and be done with it. I never surrender unless I know what I am going to get for doing it."

"You are a cool one, and if you will give us your word we will trust you that you won't begin to kick until some one begins to hurt you, and take you along with us as you are. How is it? A bargain?"

"Hum! Adventures are beginning to come my way again, a sure show that luck at the tables has run out, and that it is time for me to tie up on gambling. Well! So be it. We will go with the stream, and see where it takes us. Wonder if this has anything to do with my dream-woman?"

So much Jack said to himself without opening his lips. Then he addressed himself again to the men in the shadows.

"There is nothing on hand that I know of for to-night, and if I can do anything for you to make the time pass pleasantly, I am at your service. Lead on, and don't try any practical jokes. I am not at all a bad man from 'way back, but somehow there has always been a fatality about such nonsense in connection with your humble servant. No blindfolding, you understand; and my derringers will be ready to talk if it seems their say-so."

"Have it your own way, in so far as you have mentioned," retorted the spokesman of the ambuscaders. "With four or five to one, and none of us exactly infants, we ought to be able to take care of ourselves in case you take a crazy notion to go on the war-path before you get hold of the rights of the thing. After that, perhaps you would not think quite so hard about squirming. You can take that last in any sense you choose, so that you come along quietly. But after giving you all that you asked for there must be no more nonsense. Step up lively—or cold meat for breakfast."

The tone had a different ring in it, and it was not hard to understand that the man meant what he said. Armstrong gave a short, reckless laugh, and stepped out toward the individual who really seemed to have his fate in his hands.

"Like the lad of sense that you are. If you have no objections, suppose you take my arm. It may make mistakes less likely to occur."

He advanced his left arm as he spoke, and for answer Jack ran his right hand into the crook, and the two walked on together quite amicably.

The course pursued by the outlaw, or whatever he might turn out to be, led directly away from the town. This had happened in the outskirts, and within a minute the lights of the camps had faded out of sight, and the two men were lost in about as desolate a region of rocks and bushes as it had ever been the luck of Jack Armstrong to see. The other men might be somewhere within shooting distance, but nothing could be seen of them; and at times it was almost impossible to make out even the outlines of his companion.

"Oh, come now. Things can't be so desperate or they would not take chances like these. I could drop my friend, here, at any time; and after that, saints nor angels could find my trail till morning dawned. Guess I will hold the brakes on until I see what is in the wind. It's not to pick my pocket that they are taking me off into the bushes. Wonder what they can want of yours truly?"

While he was puzzling his head over this question, there was a slight pressure on his arm, and the two came to a sudden halt.

"This is about the end of our journey for the present. A few more steps, and they of the easiest. I would advise you to be on your guard, however, and not allow anything singular that may happen to unsettle your nerves."

"Nerves? Hum! I have none."

"All right! You say so. We will see. Now; a step downward and you will feel yourself on a pair of stairs. There is little danger of falling, and if you did do so, it is not likely that you would come to much harm. Here you are."

Sure enough, Armstrong found the step with his feet, and without hesitation began the descent.

A tumble there might have not been a laughing matter, after all, for he could tell by the sound and feel that the steps were of stone, and

he certainly had descended a dozen feet before a warning word from his conductor told him that they were again on the level.

Straight forward they went for a few yards, and then there was a sudden flash of light as a door opened in front of them, and Armstrong saw before him a small apartment, perhaps a dozen feet square, that was but rudely furnished and which had but one occupant.

No doubt it was to bring him to a meeting with this man that the attack on him had been made; and Gentle Jack looked at him with some curiosity. Whether friend or foe, he had not the least idea of who it might be, until the individual slowly rose from the bench on which he had been seated, and moving so that he was almost under the light, folded his arms and looked the prisoner in the face.

"Well, I declare!" drawled Jack, after a momentary glance. "It's the improbable that always happens. It's Elmer Conroy, or I'm no judge in spook affairs. What is the best word from the infernal regions?"

CHAPTER IX.

GENTLE JACK CLOSES HIS EYES.

THE salutation of the prisoner had an entirely different effect from the one expected by Gentle Jack. As he remembered him, Elmer Conroy was not the sort of man to be stricken breathless by anything; yet now he almost staggered as he took a step backward, and gazed unsteadily at his prisoner for a moment, without word of answer to the greeting.

Jack thought quickly enough, even if his tones were so languid; and almost at a glance he took in the situation.

"Good glory! Here's a mixture!" he thought. "Sure as you live he has caught the wrong man! Fired at the pigeon, and hit the crow. Wonder who he was after? And if I know beans, when the string is loose on the receptacle, he has been thinking all this time that I was dead, too. That is just about the way I would have looked if it had not been for the intelligence that I lately received from that amiable young lady at the hotel. Now, then, what is he going to do about it? Shall I drop him where he stands, or shall I wait to hear what he has to say for himself? It's risky playing with such edged tools, but all for fun, and everything goes. He's going to say something. Perhaps he will let the cat out of the bag. There must be some one else in these regions that's worth the finding, and before we get through I ought to know who it is."

"So you're living?" said Conroy, at length, taking a long and searching glance at his prisoner.

"I could have sworn that you went over the range. What has brought you down into the line of certain death? Hardly to find me. The grave ought to have closed all the old accounts."

"At your old tricks, are you? Think this is another bluff game, and that cheek wins. You ought to know that I can hold over you in that, every time. The grave couldn't hold either of us, it seems; and you want the game to go on from where we left off. All right. It is your play, throw your cards. If I can't show better you will rake the deck. That's all there is about it. No use palaver over outside issues."

"You know, of course, that I will kill you. I thought I had done that, long ago, but, it is never too late to do good; and when the world is relieved of Mr. Jack Armstrong that same world ought to rise up and call me blessed. If you have any last messages for your friends I shall be happy to take them. I needn't tell you to say your prayers in the little breathing time that will be yours. I am aware that you don't deal in such things."

"Not to man, anyhow," responded Armstrong, coolly.

"I do not know of course, or in any other way, what you are going to do. What you may think you will is a different thing, and I'll take your word for that much. Meantime, I may have something to say, myself. I always did think that killing was too good for you; and I don't care to hurry you along the flume until I think the matter over a bit. If I was as bitter as I once was you would have been a corpse a few minutes ago, for I shoot as straight and as quick as ever. If I crooked my finger you would drop now."

"Then you have lost your last chance. I am not taking as large risks as I was in the years gone by; and I had better put you out of the way of doing mischief before you begin to show some of those unpleasant traits, that have made your society so objectionable. I wouldn't move if I were you. It will only add to your present danger; though, of course, will not affect the final result. Good-night."

While Elmer Conroy was speaking, the light suddenly went out, and Armstrong stood alone in the darkness.

His finger did not press the trigger that lay under it, since he sagely reasoned that it would be no use. Conroy knew of the drop that had been on him, and no doubt had wriggled out of range as the darkness came. A twist of the body would do it, and the chances would be that a bullet sent in the direction in which he was

supposed to be would only be wasted. And Mr. Armstrong was a man that never wasted ammunition.

Lest a shot might be tried on him, he moved silently to one side, and crouched low, waiting to see what would be the next move.

There was no sound or sign of any one being with him in the room, and he almost thought that he would be left alone for awhile.

Then he threw up his hand to his face with a sudden gesture of dismay. There was no one to see him, and he was not quite so much on his guard as he had been when the cold eyes of Conroy were on him.

"My heavens!" he thought. "The scoundrel has me like a rat in a trap, and now he is going to smother me. What infernal fumes are these, and how is he sending them in? Unless I can find the place they come in at, and stop the hole—as the chances are that I cannot—I am a goner! Good Lord! If I thought it was any use, I believe that I should certainly howl!"

But, Mr. Armstrong did not howl; and if a light had been flashed in upon him, it is probable that his face would have been found as immobile as ever. With one hand he held his handkerchief tightly pressed to his nose, to keep out as much as possible the vapors that were slowly but surely beginning to fill the place, while he stole noiselessly around the apartment, with his other hand cautiously feeling the walls.

This did not last long. He began to feel a grip on his throat, a dizziness in his head. He reeled, stumbled, and finally fell. His senses had almost deserted him, but with his last atom of strength he turned his face in the direction of the door through which he believed Elmer Conroy had vanished, and with his revolver ready, waited in the fading hope that he might be able to strike his enemy before he died.

That enemy was well enough acquainted with his peculiarities, and did not intend to give him the chance. For five minutes the man lay there motionless, and with gradually stiffening limbs, before another sound was heard. Then the door by which Armstrong had entered once more opened, and a flood of fresh air filled the room.

Fresh air could do but little for Mr. Armstrong. He lay just as quiet at the expiration of another five minutes, his cheek resting on his arm, and the revolver still clasped in his stiffened fingers.

After a little longer waiting Conroy came once more into the room. In one hand he carried a lamp, in the other a cocked revolver. He was morally certain that the man on the floor could not harm him, yet he was taking no chances. He bent over him with a cold smile, lifted his eyelid with one finger, drew the pistol away from the clutch that could not quite retain it against even a gentle force, and then looked up toward the door.

"The wolf is safe now; I suppose you may as well come in. The sooner we dispose of him the better."

The same man who brought Armstrong thither entered at the call, and he had a companion. They looked down at the body without either surprise or aversion, but waited for further orders. Behind them came a woman, who was enveloped in a cloak, the hood of which was drawn over her head so that it concealed her features, though she held it open a little at her eyes. She could see without being seen.

"Is he dead?" she asked, bending over the body much as Conroy had done, and showing no more repugnance.

"Dead? No! Mr. Armstrong is hard to kill, and would stand a bath of that kind for a long time before he would finally pass in his checks—always provided that the right thing followed after. If he was left where he is I suppose that he would eventually starve to death; but that would take time. When a man is not moving about there is not much waste; and a fellow that won't worry can do without eating for a long time."

"Then you will have to do something—something more?"

"Considerable, if we want him to be of any further use to himself or any one else. But, the first thing to do is to get him away. There is a chance that the visitor I was expecting may come, even yet. Perhaps it would not make any difference if he saw the body, but I would as soon that Gentle Jack did not hear the conversation that would follow. Of course, I expect to kill him eventually; but it is better that he should not have the knowledge. You can't 'most always sometimes tell, and there is an especial uncertainty about this fellow. I could have sworn that I once saw him die. What he is doing here is what I must find out. You can be sure that he has not come without an object."

"Is he conscious, then?"

"He can hear what you say to him, if that is what you call consciousness; but if his eyes were ever so wide open he would not notice your face. You needn't keep it covered for fear he will ever recognize you again. But I have an idea that he is listening to this conversation with a great deal of interest, and wondering who you can be. Shall I tell him?"

"Hush! Why call attention to him at all?"

You can see that dead men come to life, at times; and if he should revive once more he might be making me a visit when it was not convenient. From all accounts he is a terrible sort of a man to have dealings with."

"Don't be afraid of him, kitten. He never harms a woman, especially one as handsome as you are. If he could once see your face, he would forgive you, even if he knew that you had been trying to fit him for a funeral. And I wanted to have you see him. You have a good memory for faces, and you must remember him if you ever see him again."

"It is not likely that I will forget him. Now that I have photographed his features, you had better take him away."

"Exactly what I was thinking. Our friends know what to do with him; a yard of talk could not explain it any better. Take him along."

Gentle Jack was very solid, if he did look delicate, and the two men found it out when they lifted him from the floor. They staggered as his weight first fairly rested in their hands, and each gave a grunt of surprise. Then they put more power to their elbows, and marched out of the apartment and up the stairway, with Jack Armstrong between them.

CHAPTER X.

BARNEY BEATS THE DECK.

FOR a stranger in the town, it was certainly remarkable how quickly Barney Kain was recognized. As it was because he was the man of another man, and not on his own account, perhaps there was nothing for self-glorification in the fact; but when the master was away the man was willing to feel his own importance, and put on a few frills. Of course he could hold his end up in an average crowd, or he would scarcely have remained so long in the employ of Mr. Armstrong.

Barney was well aware that his employer did not intend to take in the town that night; in fact, he was out on a voyage of discovery in the interests of Gentle Jack, though without any definite instructions, save that he should take a look at the place and see how it would be likely to pan out.

Barney could play a little himself, and though cards were never allowed to come between him and his duty to Mr. Armstrong when he was off duty, with permission to seek his recreation, he sometimes played a rustling game, that brought as much money on the table as the average gamster cared to handle.

He did not stop at the bar as he entered. The private supply had not yet been exhausted, and he felt no need to sample the benzine as furnished at the Daisy. He crossed the room quietly, and sunk down by the side of a vacant table, staring around him in a wondering sort of a way, that would have been bait enough for some of the hangers-on of the place if they had not known in whose company he had come to town. While it was not likely that he was exactly a high roller himself, the man who traveled with Jack Armstrong could not be altogether a fool; and the story of the way he stood off the road-agents showed that he had courage enough, and was handy with his weapons.

For a little time he was suffered to meditate in silence, and smile to himself at the surreptitious glances that were being cast in his direction. Then, in an incidental sort of way, some of the *habitués* of the house strolled in his neighborhood, and in some unexplained manner a conversation started, that ended in three of the men of Doubledeck seating themselves at the table, and a deck of cards being produced. That was the way the game began, which Simon McCarthy edged up to see.

The men were professionally of note at the Daisy, and often handled thousands, but the ante now was a moderate one, and for a time the bets partook of the same nature. No one was excited, and the winnings were so nearly equal that at the end of the first ten or fifteen minutes there was little difference made in the capital of either man.

Then the cards began to get better all around, and the interest to raise. The three men of Doubledeck said nothing but what belonged strictly to the game; but Barney showed a little excitement in his own way. When he was not busy with the routine of the game he was softly humming his favorite chorus of, "Swate Peggy McGlural, ritural."

Dan Berdan was the chief of bottom dealers, as all Doubledeck knew. So far he had dealt the cards as they came, having respect for the sharp little gray eyes that were on him. Now, all were getting warmed to the work, and he thought it time to get in some of his finer play. He gave a wink to Patsey Hoyle, who sat on his right, and drew the cards together in a way that stocked the bottom with two hands such as men usually pat on.

The result was that Patsey raised a dozen cards, took a cut from the middle, and placed it on the top, thus leaving the position of the cards at the bottom unaltered. A stranger might not object to this, though it would hardly have gone down with a Doubledeck man, who knew the forte of Dan Berdan.

Barney did not object. Indeed, he seemed to be thinking of something else, and entirely for-

getting the game. His face was turned toward the door, and he was growing more fervent over the pretty daughter of Mickey McGlural, since his voice raised a little, and he rendered a verse of the song in a tone that was just audible enough to make those bystanders who were not altogether absorbed in the game, wish for more.

Meantime, the cards dropped softly around the table. Patsey Hoyle gathered his up eagerly, and a look of disgust came over his face when he found that he received a hand that was rather worse than ordinary. It was not for him to make the grand coup.

Barney had to do the preliminary talking, and his eyes brightened as he looked over his hand.

"An' it's Pat Oi am, an' it's pat Oi shtand. Sure, an' it's a raysonable hand Oi have alriddy; an' phat's the use to botther wid more cards when Oi have enough an' plinty. Nixt! Shpake up, an' say phat yez will be afther wantin'."

The next man was Billy Wink, more generally known as "The Kid." He was little, but tough, with a face that had no more expression in it than a town pump. He could win or lose with as little show of feeling as any man that ever handled the pasteboards, and was the one of the trio who generally had the fine work to do when they struck a stranger.

Billy was so small and wooden-looking that he could lead an outsider along into the big figures before he thought of where he was going. He examined his cards deliberately, touched one or two of them hesitatingly, as though in doubt which ones he should discard; and finally laid one aside.

"Give me one, and if it fits where it belongs I will be after you all with a sharp stick. The stranger wants fun, no doubt, and from the way the deal opens I think we can give him a heap. What are you going to ask for, Patsey?"

Patsey asked for three, while Berdan only took one card. Then the battle began.

There was no limit to the betting, except the size of the players' piles; consequently, after such an opening, it was but natural to suppose that the stakes would mount upward as on the wings of eagles.

At the very outset it was plain that either there were some good hands afloat, or else some one was doing a wonderful amount of bluffing. The three men of Doubledeck heaped it up, while Barney followed close. It was really the stiffest game that had been seen there for a long time. More money had been on the tables there, perhaps, though not very often; and then it was some of the richest men in town that put it down.

Patsey Hoyle was the first to stop; and only because his pocketbook was empty. He gave a dismal sigh as he turned his buckskin inside out to show that it held nothing more, and pushed his last dollar into the pool.

"Just an even two hundred that I have up. Please remember that, because, when you are all done betting, I want a sight for my money. I think I have a little the best hand on the board, but I never borrow to raise, and I may as well stop now as a little later on. Send the game along lively, for I don't want to wait too long before I gather in my share of the stakes."

"You may have a better hand than mine, but blame me if I ain't willing to risk as much as you have up, to be sure I'll see it," retorted Dan Berdan.

"Here's wid ye!" exclaimed Barney, as he threw down just what was needed to come in, and then went on lumming his favorite air.

"And here's just a leetle better," muttered Billy Wink, as he carefully counted over his capital and deposited it on the table, with the exception of a few dollars that he thrust into his vest pocket.

"I'm just where Patsey is, with my pile. Bar- ring enough in my pocket to treat the house when the game is over, you have everything I carried in front of you, and I would put the rest down too quick if I had to."

Berdan hesitated a moment, and looked over his hand again, though he knew well enough what was in it. There was no use in the world of his coming in, though he had a good enough set of cards to go a thousand dollars on if he had not known that Wink and the Irishman could each show something better. The only possible effect might be that Barney would be so much the more anxious to see the money already up. It would add that much the more to the possible winnings, without increasing the chance for loss. If Kane was inclined to hesitate, the extra money might decide him. They had expected that Barney carried so much capital or they would have put more of their own into Billy's hands, but it was too late for that now, and they did not care to begin a game on trust. There might be developments later on that would affect the certainties of their winnings. He squinted at Barney, and saw a look of trouble and hesitation in his eyes that he seemed to be trying to hide from the rest. It would not take much more to decide him. With sudden resolution Dan Berdan threw his pocket-book on the table.

"I can't quite reach you, Billy, but, there is all I have. I'm like Patsey. When I have a

good thing I'm going to make all there is in the wood, or go broke like a good fellow."

Kain had the last say-so, and he slowly counted over his cash, as he laid it down on the table, keeping an eye on the amount that Berdan had, on his recommendation, counted out of his pocketbook.

"Faith, an' that calls the lot av yez. Lit me say phat it wor that yez wor all so frisky on. Av it's betther than me own it's Barney Kain will go bourst himsilf."

"I generally try to have the last word myself," said Billy, looking around the board with a tolerably satisfied air. "I can't always have the earth, though, so just now I'll be satisfied with four of a kind, and kings at that. If they are not good enough I'll do my crying after I get home."

"Leaves my leetle flush nowhere," sighed Patsey, who was perfectly satisfied that the kings were good enough for anything at the board, and who would have backed them for a million before he saw what the hand was.

"Good enough for me," chimed in Berdan, holding on to the cards in his hands, and looking keenly at those Billy had strung on the board.

"An' four aces takes the cake!" exclaimed Barney, throwing down his cards face upward with one hand, while with the other he made a quick sweep of the board. He was nobody's fool, and knew that with a pot of that size the sooner it was reduced to possession the better it would be.

A ringing curse from Billy Wink showed that he could be startled, even if it did not happen very often. Then he pushed his chair away from the table, and with his eyes fixed on Dan Berdan dropped his hand to his pistol. His first thought was that their pard had played them false. Such things sometimes happen. When skin gamblers can no longer find victims they can pluck, the next thing is to fight it out among themselves. It was not as bad for Barney to win as for Berdan to go back on a pard.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ERA OF GOOD FEELING.

IF the astonishment that was in Dan Berdan's eyes had been a little less intense it is possible that Billy Wink would have dropped him then and there, without stopping to reason. Fortunately for the gambler who had dealt, the voice of Barney, who spoke a moment later, had a soothing effect. Under other circumstances it would not have done so; but just now it made Billy think he had better be sure he had picked out the right mark before he began to shoot.

"Sure now, jintlemin," began Barney, in the most innocent manner imaginable, "phat iver wor ther use av lookin' blue? It's ther fort'n av war, an' nixt toime it may all come *your* way. Lit's adjourn to ther bar, an' av it's naded it's not Barney Kain phat will refuse good min a starther. It's no objict ter me av yer l'ave out ther fun; an' Oi'll be azier in me moinde av Oi know this light's divarsions won't rist too heavy on yer sows."

"As you say; it's only the luck of war," laughed Berdan, taking his cue in an instant.

"Of course we have enough in the locker for a shot at the town, and if you want to see what Doubledeck looks like by moonlight we shall be happy to show you. I speak for myself; and am pretty sure that my friends will join with me in what I say. How is it, Wink? We don't crow when we win; and we don't kick when we lose. Eh, old man?"

There was a covert wink with the words, that meant a great deal. Billy was cooler now, and inclined to believe that for once Dan had made a mistake in his deal; or else they had struck a player of such force that in his hands they were but children. The wink told him that in Dan's view of things it would be better to try to get a shy at the Irishman in some other place. If they could have him to themselves with his pockets full, they could try the virtues of some other plan, since cards had failed.

"The stranger has cleaned us out just too quick, and that's a fact. All the trouble with me is that we didn't give him common amusement. If he will excuse us for that the rest all goes, and I shall be happy to be with the party."

That settled it. Patsey Hoyle jumped as the others whistled, and the four men arose from the table in apparently the best of humors with each other, and strolled toward the bar. As they went along they picked up Simon McCarthy. He was staring so straight at Dan that the latter could not help but nod, and then Simon naturally went along with them.

"If you're going to paint the town up red, that is just my name, too," was what he said as he nodded to the sort of introduction that he received. "I was thinking about going it alone; but, company goes a heap better. There is no one knows the ropes better than Dan Berdan, and he will be apt to show us both a wrinkle before morning if he takes right hold in earnest. When you take the cards away there is not much life left at the Daisy, and I guess you have all had enough of them to last the night out."

"Sure, an' there's worse things than a game av draw whin ye stroike jintlemin wid sinse an' wilth ter ingage in it. But Oi wad loike to see something av the town whole Oi have the

chance. Ivery wan must join me at the bar, an' thin it's on our thravels, wid Misther McCarthy as wan av the parthy."

McCarthy did not intend to have the three get away with the wealth of the Irishman, which he was pretty certain they would do if they had him to themselves.

Perhaps, when the present frolic was over, he might have a chance for himself. And in the course of a night around town it would be pretty strange if he did not find out what Barney knew concerning Gentle Jack, and his mission to Doubledeck. He went up to the bar with the rest, and when every disengaged man in the house had joined them, and a lot of congratulations had been given by men who would have been only too glad to graft themselves upon the party, and various expressions of admiration made in regard to the cool way the men of Doubledeck always took their losses, the five went out to look around for more fun.

As they passed through the door McCarthy fell in by the side of Barney, which gave the trio a chance for a momentary conference as they sauntered a little in the rear of the others.

"With all that boodle on him we must take a shy, somehow," whispered Berdan.

"And I tell you it is no use trying him again with the pasteboards. There was no mistake about those hands. I gave him four queens, fair and square from the bottom. Would have given him the kings and some one else the aces if I had not been afraid that he would smell a rat. Those aces must have been in the deck when I laid it down; and when I looked it over afterward the queens were there and the aces gone. How did he get them?"

"He's a card-charmer from 'wayback, and just gave us two at our own game and then beat us bad. It's no difference how he worked the trick. He got there all the same. What's the next thing on the table? I don't guess he is to carry all that pile home, even if we have to have a bit of conversation with Sime McCarthy. What in blazes does he mean putting in his oar? It's none of his funeral; and he ain't the sort of man we can say 'pards' to."

"Well, if Irish is such a gilt-edge gambler, that three sharp spellers watched him without being able to see how he worked the oracle, what sort of a man do you suppose his boss is? I swear! I don't fancy the idea of getting him on our trail. Mebbe the best plan would be to seem to drop off after a bit, and turn him over to Sime. Then come back on him as he strikes for home. I did think the wrinkle would be to rake his dummy in the press, down at Mart's, and then shout, 'Stop thief!' But with Simon around it's a chance if we can work that without his seeing through the game. All the whisky you could pour into him would never make him look double; and if we drink anything like fair he'll have us under the table before we know what we are doing. Curse him! If it wasn't for the gang at the mine that's behind him, I would drop him for good luck, anyhow. The best we can do is to hang together, and when we see a good chance rake in the spoils, if we have to send 'em both over the range. If the chance don't come soon, drop out, and come back on 'em when they are not looking. If we make the raffle we can afford to jump the camp—and if we make a miss of it the camp will jump us. Now, there is no time for more. Get up with the procession, and keep your eyes open for what comes next."

The caution was given just in time, for, as their heads, which had been naturally drawn together, separated, the men in advance looked around.

"I suppose you fellows intend to steer him around to Mart's?" asked McCarthy.

"I didn't wring in to spoil sport, but because I was out for a flare-up and took the first chance I saw for company. If there is anything better than the old man's, trot us to it; but I have never seen anything that would quite reach it."

"Mart's it is. Not exactly the kind of a spot where I would want to send a stranger to wander alone, but with a crowd like this I guess there will be no foolishness in the boys there. If there is, the stranger had better understand that it is shoot first and reason with them afterward. They are a pretty wild set when they get to going."

"Swate Peggy McGlural, ritual!" sung Barney. "Sure, an' av it's a bit av a ruction that they had be afther havin' it's not me mither's ownly darlint that was disapp'int him. Git me a sthick, an' show me the head to whack, an' Barney Kain is all to home an' happy."

As Barney never stopped to inquire what sort of a place they were taking him to, no one thought it necessary to explain; but the little troupe strolled on, talking of other things, and never noticing the two flitting figures that all the time stole along behind them.

As it was Saturday night, and the town had its visitors from all the neighboring mines, things were lively everywhere, and getting more so. "Mart's" was quite on the other side of Doubledeck, and they stopped at several places on the road, thus giving Barney a chance to learn something more of the ropes, and pay for considerable bad whisky as he went along. By

and by they heard the sound of music and a dull thump of feet.

"Hoorah!" shouted Barney. "It's betther than m'ate an' dhrink! Music an' a chance to shake me fut! Steer for it quick, an' it's all the expenses that Oi'll be afther payin'. Sure, an' it's 'The Devil Among the Tailors' that he's playin' now, an' that always sits me woid!"

Catching one of his companions with either hand, he hurried them forward, and soon came stumbling through the door that opened into Mart's with a genuine Irish whoop, that nearly raised the roof. If he had come in that way alone, there is little doubt that there would have been an immediate effort made to send him out again in double-quick time. But with Dan Berdan on one side of him and Simon McCarthy on the other, he had a pair of vouchers not likely to be disputed, and who would probably calm down the exuberant feelings of their *protege* before he went much further.

But Barney heard music, and very good music it was.

Under such sounds he was not apt to keep either silent or still. Down the floor he came, shaking his feet and rattling his heels in a lively Irish jig.

"Glory to me sowl!" he shouted. "Av Oi only had a bit av a switch in me fingers Oi wad show yez a dance that wor one."

Then he swung his arms around him, and made his feet go faster, in an utter abandon that provoked a smile from some few of the spectators, and a wild enthusiasm among most of the rest.

It goes without saying that Mart's was a dance-house; but, though the etiquette there was of the very loosest kind, there were certain traditions that it was as well to respect. One of them was, that it was as well for a stranger to make the acquaintance of the proprietor, or one of his accredited agents, before attempting to take possession of the floor. Another was that the man who did not read the rules and regulations, that were pinned up at the end of the bar, might find himself in the hands of a bouncer before he knew it. The Mexican settlement at the further end of Doubledeck furnished Mart's best, or at least most regular, patrons, and they were jealous of their rights. It was better all around for the proprietor and his aides to take the matter of regulation in hand than to leave it to them. More than one man had been carried away on a shutter, bleeding from a silent knife-thrust, and no one ever the wiser as to who gave it.

The one thing in Barney's favor was that he gave his exhibition alone—a very good exhibition it was—and did not attempt to interfere with the ladies, of whom there were quite a number present, all in mask. It was over the senioritas that the trouble at Mart's usually began; and Dan Berdan thought that if he knew anything about Irish human nature the era of good feeling would not long continue.

Nor was he very widely mistaken.

CHAPTER XII.

"BARNEY, LET THE GIRLS ALONE."

THE music came abruptly to an end at a signal from Mart, who began to think that the exhibition had lasted long enough.

Barney rattled on with his feet until he came to the end of his step, and then swaggered up to the bar, behind which, flanked on either side by a brawny assistant, stood the man whom it was not hard to pick out as the proprietor of the house.

"Sure, an' phat did yez be afther doin' that pbor? It shpooled me illegant sthiep, joost az Oi wor riddy ter show yez all ther latist from Limerick. Phor half a cint Oi'd wrack the shanty. Az it is, hand out the mountain jew, an' iv'ry mither's son av yez in the house j'ine me in dhrinkin' long loife to Mart an' his music."

There was no change in Barney's tone, but the ending of his speech was so entirely different from what was expected, that Mart overlooked the growl at the beginning, though he cautiously determined to satisfy himself as to the solvency of his man before setting down his decanters to the delighted rounders that were crowding up to accept the proffered hospitality of the stranger.

For a definite amount of profit he would be willing to defer his examination into what might be intended as a covert insult. But he did not intend to swallow his indignation and be bilked to boot.

"If you hed talked that way afore yer began yer steps mebbe we wouldn't hev rung down on yer so soon. But when a stranger comes in here and tries to run the house, he must have either money or guns, an' so fur I haven't seen that you had either."

"An' now yez knows that Oi have thim both," exclaimed Barney, sternly, with a motion of either hand that was almost too quick for sight.

On the bar in front of him was a thick roll of bills, that looked as if there was value enough in them to buy the establishment, while the muzzle of a cocked revolver was staring Mart in the face.

"Whin Oi invite the house to dhrink wid me,

av the propriethor don't want me gowld, sure, an' he hez to take me lead. Take your choice at wanst, phor it's dyin' wid thourst that the b'yes all are, an' av Oi hadn't bin dhrinkin' all the way along Oi'd be dhry meself."

With the hammer up, the revolver was talking almost as loud as Barney, and it did not seem to Mart that he had very long to make up his mind. It was more likely that Kain was drunk than that he was sober, and Mart had seen men shot down in cold blood before that evening. He gave one glance at Barney, and another at the serious faces of the men who had come in with him, and then wilted. He reached behind him for a brace of decanters, and his aids took their cues at once. The immediate danger was tided over, and the crowd, that had halted at the prospect of a row, once more surged forward, and in no time was drinking with the free and easy stranger.

Those who came forward were almost without exception Americans. Almost as many more were in the room, who, it was not hard to see, were Mexicans. Kain cast a discontented glance at them, and half-raised a foot as though about to move in their direction. They were mostly seated on benches along the wall, and were partaking of the liquid refreshments that had been brought them by waiters, or were lazily smoking cigarettes.

McCarthy's hand dropped warningly on the shoulder of the Irishman.

"Don't meddle with the Greasers until the rest of us have had a little fun. It may be all right for you, if your tastes run in the direction of a row, but if you bother with them it will break up the meeting in a jiffy, and there will be more or less cold meat for breakfast. Shake your toe a little before you get down to serious work."

"Sure, av the spalpeens don't want to dhrink wid me, Oi thought it wad be no more than ginorous to give thim a chance to foight. But, as ye say, they're nothin' but Graysers, an' Oi'll settle wid thim afther the whole. Joost now Oi m'ane to have a fr'indly talk wid wan av the angels. Oi have heard say thor wcr nothin' half so bewitchin' az the Mexican seniorita; an', begorra, it's meself that will say av it wor the truth they wor givin' me."

"That's ten times worse than stirring up the men directly," began McCarthy; but his warning was not heeded. Barney had slipped away from his fingers, and was gliding across the room, as the music once more struck up, and some one shouted, "Take your partners!"

As every one else had his hat on, Barney did not want to appear odd; but outside of that he could not have approached the damsel whom he had marked for his attentions with more politeness.

A low bow and a scrape.

"Pardon, loight av me oyes, but as a sthranger Oi must address ye, or lit the blessid chance go by. Wad ye be afther acceptin' the attentions av Barney Kain phor the nixt dance? He's a daycint lad, that kin do ye joostice, an' wad rifer to Misther Jack Armstrong, av it's any doubt ye have phor his rispictibility."

At the same time Barney offered his arm with an easy grace.

The lady whom he had picked out was sitting by herself, on one end of a long bench. Either she was alone at the fandango, or her escort had stepped out of sight, and as the music was uttering its preliminary chords, and the dancers were beginning to move out on the floor, perhaps Barney was not altogether to be blamed in thinking that he might find in her a willing partner. There were a number of things that he did not take into account, among them the noisy way he had made his first appearance on the floor. The woman gave no answer in words, but drew the shawl that had been resting on her shoulders up to her face and shrunk back, as if in some alarm.

"Och, ye naden't be afear'd! Barney Kain's not the b'ye to crowd himsilf onto the company av a lady av she's not willin'; but av ye don't favor me, it's me chance that's lost altogether: an' sure, ye'r the gim av the whole collection, an' it wad be happiness onsp'akable av ye wad honor me wid yer hand, av it wor ownly for a minnit."

"Thank you, sir, for the honor; and if I wished to appear on the floor, I assure you that I would not hesitate for a moment to accept you as my partner. Believe me, I had no idea of dancing when I came here, and am only too sorry that what seemed duty called me into such a place. Please leave me. Your presence will only draw attention in my direction, which is the last thing that I would desire."

"Av course. An' as whin wan comes into a place loike this is there's no tellin' phat may happen, av ye n'ade a deescrate frind afour ye I'ave, lit me know, an' ye'll foind Barney Kain at yer sarvice. Good-avenin' to yez; an' the saints pertict ye. Phat ye will be afther foindin' here are all av the ither koind."

Barney had been a little surprised that the lady spoke in accents so purely American as to leave no doubt of her nationality. No Mexican damsel was she; and she did not seem at all like the sort of a girl to stray alone into a dance-house like Mart's, nor to remain after she

once caught a glimpse of what the place was like. He was afraid that there was trouble in store for her, and wondered what the mystery was that had drawn her thither. After his offer of services he was about to withdraw at once; and it would have been better, perhaps, if the lady had allowed him to do so without further comment.

But it was not in her nature to pass over his offer of services without notice, and he lingered to hear her return her thanks. She spoke briefly enough, but while the words were on her lips there came an interruption for which the intrusion of Barney was the excuse.

"Vile miscreant! Dost thou not know that such things are not borne here? Wouldst thou insult the ladies under our protection? Begone, before I chastise thee as thou deservest!"

And the hand of the speaker fell upon the shoulder of the little Irishman with no light weight.

The man had approached so silently that he would have surprised almost any other man. He was tall, dark visaged, and dressed in the garb of a Mexican. To the frequenters of the house he was known as Black Miguel, and was supposed, on pretty good grounds, to be a dangerous man. He had been engaged in more than one deadly affray; and though it was hard to find any one who would say that he had actually seen Miguel use a weapon, yet somehow, when he was in a fracas, there was generally a dead man on the floor when the affair was over.

Of course, Barney could not tell much about him from the quick glance that he took, but he was inclined to think that he was an extra bad man, who was then and there anxious for a row, whatever might be the reason for it.

"Av ye please, Oi wor not insultin' the leddy; but av it's any great accommodation Oi wad be willin' to insult *you*, any way ye wad loike to have it. An' av ye don't take yer claws off me elbow it's down ye go in liss than half a seckind be the clock."

The cool retort was something of a surprise to Black Miguel, and he stared at the little fellow that gave it. He had rather expected that if he wanted a fight he would have to lead up to it by a course of insult. He was prepared for a protest from Barney against the declaration that he had been insulting the lady; but this thing of half a second to fall back in was a little too much for him to understand, and as he had an idea from all he had heard that the Irishman was a good man with his weapons, in spite of the fact that there was no movement to produce any, he raised his hand and stepped back a pace or two. It was so involuntary that Miguel was ashamed of it an instant later; but by that time he was fairly covered by the pistol that Barney seemed to shake out of his clothes in some inscrutable way.

"It's a lad av sinse ye are; an' now ye want to git down on yer knees an' ask me pardon fur suggestin' Oi wad be guilty av insultin' a leddy. Down wid ye, or Oi goos the top av yer head. It's Barney Kain or talks to ye!"

Miguel looked around him wildly. He did not understand this turning of the tables, but he could see for himself that Barney was very much in earnest and something had to be done. He did not know that the idea of Kain was to draw attention to himself so as to allow the lady to make her escape unnoticed. The more the Irishman thought of it the more he was satisfied—though in this he was altogether wrong—that this attack was made to unmask the lady rather than to draw him into the difficulty.

"Oh, you naden't look 'round for your fri'nds," continued Barney. "They have business somewhere else, an' av they hadn't ye wad be did afore they could hilp ye. Wan little prayer, an' thin—"

And at that point the room suddenly darkened; there was a cry from the lips of the woman, and a surging rush of footsteps in the direction of the spot where Barney Kain was standing when the lights went out.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RIOT AT MART'S, AND THE LIGHTS GO OUT.

MIXED with the sound of the rush was the noise of the overturning bench, and the voice of Barney, shouting:

"Kape away from me, fri'ends! Oi 'm rin-nin' this ruction meself!"

Then—"whack! whack! whack!" Barney's eyes had been about him. He had noticed that one of the legs of the bench on which the woman had been sitting would make a very effective cudgel, short though it was, and slipping away his pistol, which he did not care to use unless he found it absolutely necessary, he overturned the seat in the way of the coming crowd, possessed himself of the stick, and laid about him with a right good will, assured that if he hit the head of any man who was on his side it was the fault of its owner, after the warning that he had so plainly given. As two or three men stumbled over the bench that he had cast in their path, and he straightway leveled several more, first of all paying attention to Miguel, it was not long before a more than ordinarily large section of pandemonium seemed to have broken loose at Mart's.

A hand making a dash at the pocket in which he had seemed to thrust the roll of bills after paying for the drinks that he had ordered on making his entrance, gave him an idea of what the rush might mean. The money was there no longer—he knew a trick worth two of that—but he fought as hard as though it was. This person, whoever he was, had crept around the crowd, and behind him, and would perhaps have succeeded in his attempt had not Barney beforehand provided for just such an emergency.

The knowledge that the money was elsewhere made Kain twice as cool as he would otherwise have been. He swung his club around with a quick stroke, and heard the dull thud that followed with a grim satisfaction, and the sound of the man stumbling away.

"Sure, an' Oi have ye marked. Av Oi haven't bruk yer arrum ye may call me a liar frum 'way back."

Then he applied himself as industriously as before to the work in front. As long as there was no one behind him he felt that he could safely go on with his amusement; if the affair grew too hot there was a convenient window through which he could make his escape. He would have remained and fought it out for an indefinite time had it not been for something that he overheard, in spite of the din around, and the lively way he was swinging his stick.

"No, I didn't get it, and he's doctored my arm until it's no good. It feels as though he had broken the bone in a dozen pieces. Curse him! Kill him before you try him again! He has the luck of the Old Boy; and if you don't hurry up he will be off with the boodle before we can get in our work."

The voice was the voice of Billy Wink and no doubt he was speaking to his comrades. After that there was nothing to keep Barney there. This was not the place to pay the men for their treachery; and he had enough money about his person to induce him to take at least ordinary precaution. Without hesitation he sprang through the window.

Hardly had he struck the ground when he was followed by a man whom he recognized as Simon McCarthy.

"You're out of that alive, and that's a heap more than I expected when I saw that Dan Berdan was going to wring in his gang on you. We had better be tripping out of this as lightly as possible. Try them a hitch some other evening if you want to, when you haven't quite so much wealth to take care of. If you had not been rank, staring crazy you would never have gone in there with such a little fortune in your pockets, and men around to grab for it, like Dan Berdan and his pards. This way. I know the town like a book."

"Sure, an' Oi thought they wor moighty fri'ndly wid me afther Oi had won the'r money; but Oi didn't belave they would come back on me that way. Av they wanted to kick, why didn't they kick at the Daisy?"

"They know a trick worth two of that—you sure you have your wealth all right, yet?"

"Ye kin bit hoigh on that. Oi fild wan av the hounds grab fur it; but, bedad, it wornt there; an' Oi give him a swoipe that he will be afther rememb'ring. Be the same token, he talked loike Billy Wink, or his ghost."

"That was the game they were up to; and heretofore it has generally won. Get you down to Mart's, and have one of their side pards pick a row with you. Clean out your pockets themselves—and there are no lighter fingers in the town—and then pretend, when the lights are lit again, to help you look after the thief. I was watching the game, for I have it in for that same gang, but you didn't give me a chance to chip. I thought you would begin to shoot when the crowd came. How does it come that you didn't?"

"It's the boss does the shootin', an' Oi take the sthick. Whin Oi do shoot it's ownly to kill."

"Well, you don't want to hesitate long when you get in such a crowd as that. Now, if you will take a little good advice, you will go home and put away some of that wealth where the dogs won't find it. Those fellows would murder you to get even, and will follow you a year to get their wealth back. But, I swear! I would like to know where you got those four aces. Dan Berdan hardly gave them to you."

"Oi sushpict they grew," answered Barney, with a wink so shrewd that it was a pity it was lost in the darkness. "At onny rate, though Oi have no planthation it wor me own hands raised thim. A mon can't thravil wid misther Jack widout pickin' up some av the rudiments. But Oi've sane all Oi keer to be sayin' to-night. It's wilth widout ind Oi have gathered in, an' it's shlaope Oi'll be nadin' more than fun. There's wan thing Oi wad loike to know afour Oi go. Oi wor thryin' to have a bit av conversathion wid a damsil, joost afour the loights went out. Oi ought to say that no harrum has come to her."

"Don't worry about her. I had an eye in that direction, and saw her slip away before the racket had fairly begun. As you are a stranger here I don't suppose that you found out who she was."

"Ownly that she wor a leddy. But Oi

moightily sushpict she wor one that come down in the stage wid us. Phat wor she doin' here?"

They were some distance from the dance-house by this time, and looking back could see that the place was once more a blaze of light and that the uproar had ceased; though there were a number of dark figures swarming about the outside, as if looking for the Irishman, who was generally supposed to be the cause of all the confusion. As the racket had been less serious than the average outbreak in that place, the probabilities were that the broken heads would be bound up, and the amusements of the evening go on as though they had not received any interruption. The knowledge of the character of the men whom he had recklessly accepted as pards for the evening seemed to have sobered Barney sufficiently to take away from him all desire for further exploration, and he turned his face toward the hotel with the greatest readiness.

As they went along McCarthy asked a number of questions in an incidental sort of way that could hardly excite suspicion; but the information about Mr. Armstrong that he could get out of Barney Kain was not of much importance. He did not care to speak too plainly in regard to the difficulty between Judge Haddington and the sport, or perhaps Barney might have been led to be more explicit.

When they had come within a hundred yards of the hotel McCarthy halted.

"There's the place you are aiming for," he said, pointing down the street. "It is hardly worth while to go along any further, as I would only have to come back. Good-night, and take care of yourself. When you wander in the dark after this, look out for Dan Berdan and his crowd; and don't say much about them to outsiders. You might be talking to the right man to carry it where it would do the most harm; and Doubledeck don't quite know the truth about those three sports. They might not believe you in some quarters; and that would give you a bad reputation in the town. It's rough enough place for a stranger, anyhow."

He did not wait for an answer, but turned at that, and marched away, without having offered his hand at parting. As he went along he shook his head, and muttered to himself:

"If that is the way that I am going to look after the judge's interests he had better get a new man in the Gray Mare. If the master is as good as the man, I am not sure but what it will end by my liking them both. I didn't make much out of Barney, and I know as little as ever what has brought them to Doubledeck."

He was on his way now to see the judge, and after that he expected to turn in. There was nothing more to be done in regard to the sport and his man, and he felt in little humor for continuing his racket around town. If he had not been thinking of Gentle Jack, and the Irishman, he would perhaps have paid more attention to his own affairs, and would have noticed the flitting figures that had been in attendance on him during the whole evening, and now drew nearer. They were behind him, and kept largely in the shade; but now and then they took the chances of being seen as they shot across a glare of light from some window in their anxiety to draw closer, for the time when he would strike the dark and lonely path for which they knew by instinct he was aiming.

Their chance came at last. When he was hidden the most in the darkness he stumbled upon a stone that was lying in the path. At that moment the two sprang on him with a savage snarl that they in vain tried to suppress. There was a confused struggle, in which the man from Gray Mare put forth all his strength in one vain effort, and then they held him at their mercy.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIMON MCCARTHY HAS A VERY CLOSE CALL.

"QUICK! While I hold him brain him with yer club. When he's found, it won't be hard fur 'em to guess who done ther trick. Oh, ye would, would ye? Take that!"

As the ruffian who had not yet spoken raised himself to take the advice of his brutal partner, McCarthy, who felt the fingers at his throat rapidly choking him into insensibility, made another effort.

But, the chances were too much against him; and when the fellow holding him struck him a desperate blow with the butt of a clubbed pistol he sunk back in a state of semi-insensibility.

It was too dark, just there, to see what was being done, and the other asked in some excitement:

"Hev yer done fur him, Tom?"

"Done fur him, nothin'. Only bit him a leetle rap with the end ov my barker to tell him ter lie still. But it's too dark in here to do up work so ez ter pass muster. Here, take hold, an' drag him out a leetle, inter ther light! You go ter swingin' that club 'round here an' you'll be just ez apt ter baste me."

There was something in that, as his companion had already discovered, and without delay he stooped, and caught hold of the other shoulder. Then, between them, they pulled McCarthy away from the spot, his heels dragging over the ground in a lifeless sort of a way that

suggested it was hardly worth while to take any more trouble on his account.

They did not go very far until they were ready to halt again. The outlines of their prisoner could be dimly seen, and they did not want to waste too much time for fear of interruption.

"That'll do," said the man with the club, loosening his hold, and allowing his side of the body to come heavily to the ground.

"Now, jest stand aside an' let me finish up the work. It's been nigh a year sence me an' you swore ter git even with him. It seemed ez though ther time were never comin'; but it's got here at last."

There was an air of savage triumph in the tones of the fellow as he raised his club—the identical one with which Barney had been doing such good work at the dance-house—and Tom stepped back in expectation of hearing the bones crunch under the blow.

Then there was a diversion—and something more.

The man with the club fell like a log before Tom knew that anything had happened to him. Then Tom was conscious that some one else was present—and that was all. Before he knew what was going to happen he was lying in a tangled looking sort of a heap alongside of his partner.

"An' now," broke in a voice that it was not hard to recognize as belonging to Barney Kain, "av ye move hand er foot Oi'll have ter sallivate yer. Oi can't afford ter take no chances; an' mebbe it wad be betther ter do it fourst, an' look after him afterward. It's me own cabeza that Oi intind to be takin' keer av, an' don't yez fergit it."

"Thanks," murmured a voice that belonged to a weak man; but a man that did not seem to be in danger of immediate death. "Don't kill them till I get on my feet. Perhaps I will want to do it myself. That one fellow had a club in his hand. Get that, and hit them if they try to move—look out they don't shoot you from where they lay. I'll be all right in another minute."

"Bedad! it's me own shtick they had!" exclaimed Barney, as he recovered the weapon, and recognized it by the feel.

"An' to think, av they had kilt ye, an' the shtick had bin found here to-morry mornin', ye wad always have thought that it wor Barney Kain az did it!"

A laugh from McCarthy was convincing proof that he was not only not seriously injured, but that he had about recovered from the rough handling. He raised to his feet without much effort, and at once proceeded to bend over his assailants.

"Would you?" he suddenly exclaimed, and with a well-executed kick sent from Tom's hand the revolver that worthy had managed quietly to draw.

"Just look after the other one a moment while I draw this fellow's teeth. I know him, and that tells plainly enough who his partner is. I knew they had it in for me; but I never thought they would have the courage to attack a man, even if he had stumbled in the dark. There! If this fellow can bite now, I am willing that he should make his teeth meet as soon as he wants. Let's see how the other pans out in the way of armament."

"Ye nadn't worry about him. Oi got the square sthroke at him, an' he's sinseliss enough to be did. Oi wouldn't wondther av his nick wor bruk."

"Small difference if it is, but I guess it is not as bad as that. He is not of the kind so easily killed. Put your gun to the ear of this one and I will look after him a little. Maybe he is only shamming. He has the nerve for both of them, and might be up to some game. I don't trust him anyhow."

"Thin why not make sure av the dirty spalpeen? They wad have had ye murdered av Oi had come a minnit later."

"No, no. That will hardly do. If I had seen them coming, with blood in their eyes, I would have been willing enough to send them both over the range; but I can't start a man out of the damp without giving him a chance. I'll see that they are both stripped of their tools, and then turn them adrift. I haven't a bit of doubt but what I will live to regret it, but I always try to be half-way white, even to dirty whelps like these."

"You white?" snarled the ruffian who had been addressed as Tom.

"You never gave a man a fair shake in your life; and you have as big a graveyard as any man in Doubledeck. If you wer'n't afraid the boys would find you out and skin you alive, like they were going to the time that you killed poor Bob White—as true a man as ever wore boots, and died with 'em on. Turn us loose if you dare; and some day you'll find a good man in front of you to fight it out to the death. Then, you can bet there will be no one shot in the back unless you try to run."

"Sure enough. Bob White was a pard of yours. He was also a horse-thief. If he had kept off of my horse, or halted when I told him to stop, he might have been shot in front instead of rear. You probably have not forgotten that there are several little matters treasured up against you in the minds of the Doubledeck lambs, and if I turned you over to them to-

night you would both of you be gracing a tree before morning. I wonder that you were willing to run that risk."

"I'd run that chance a dozen times over ter have one good belt at you with that stick," viciously growled the fellow, gathering courage somewhat. "If you mean ter murder us, better do it now. Next time we make a jump there won't be no fool of an outsider to see you over the rifle. Ef it hadn't bin fur him Bob would hev bin a-gittin' his satisfaction out ov ye, over in ther happy huntin'-grounds."

"I've half a notion to do as I said, and turn you over to the boys. But I never did like to seem to be asking some one else to do what I wouldn't do myself. Your pard's neck is all right, and he will be coming to in a little. Then I would advise you to take the first boat out of town. I'll give you half an hour's grace; and then a hint to some of the boys that you have been around. If they find you after that—good-by, John!"

With that final leave-taking McCarthy turned away, and taking the arm of Barney, moved from the spot. He was entirely recovered from the rough handling he had received, and appeared to have changed his mind since he parted from Kain, near the hotel, for he began to move back leisurely over the same ground.

"See here, Kain. It's not often in life that I have felt myself any man's debtor as much as I feel yours. How did you come to be on the spot just at the right time? I saw you making a straight break for the hash-house; and I could have sworn you were going in for the night."

"Sure, an' Oi looked back for joost no reason at all; an' saw the thaves av the worruld prowlin' 'round afther ye. Oi worn't quito sure, but it samed to have a quare look, so Oi follyed on to say the ind av it. An' thin Oi wadn't have bin an Oirishman av Oi hadn't sthruck wid both hands."

"Good that you did, and put all the steam on that you knew how to carry, or I would have been a dead man; and perhaps you would have been worse off. They would have murdered you by inches if you had not downed them. They belonged to a gang of horse-thieves and road-agents who cursed this section for a time, and I believe are in the same business now. I had occasion to drop one of their number, who had ridden off on a horse of mine; and they swore vengeance for that, and for several other reasons which it is not necessary to tell for the present. I want to thank you for the risk you ran for the sake of a man who was a comparative stranger, and to say that if ever I have a chance to pay you back, you can count on Simon McCarthy doing his level best to even the account."

"Whist, now! Sure an' that wor nothing at all, at all. Joost wait till Oi have done something worth the while. Av Oi sthay here long it will be something illigant, an' not a doubt av it, that we'll be havin' togither. Somethin' tells me so; an' that somethin' never loies."

"But you don't understand! Confound it, man, how can you unless I make a clean breast? The truth is that while I hitched myself on to your crowd to see that those villains who had you in tow should do you no harm, I had a selfish motive. I wanted to learn all about this man—this John Armstrong—with whom you came to town."

"An' why wouldn't ye? Gentil Jack is a man av note; an' it's kings an' quanes thimselves that have bin ashkin' Barney Kain phat he knew about the grate High Roller."

"Good enough for them to do that; but there is something about this that you don't understand, and I am going to give you the straight tip even if you think I am a fool. For various reasons that I cannot explain to you without involving others needlessly, I was seeking for points to use against him. It may be that I will be compelled to buck against him—to fight him tooth and nail—and so I was looking out in advance to see how the land might lie. I want to make you understand that however things may go between Armstrong and myself, I will never forget the favor you have done me, or cease to be your friend."

"Och, have done wid yer blarney," retorted Barney, as he turned on the porch of the hotel, and looked down at the earnest face of McCarthy, who halted as though he did not intend to come any further.

"Ye wouldn't be afther namin' ther boss an' me in ther same brith?"

"Jack Armstrong is nothing to me save a possible enemy; but you are the man that saved my life. Not that I care for living so much, but I would hate to be sent up the flume by wretches like those."

"But av ye remember me, Oi am opin to a bit ye will be always the fri'nd av Mither Armstrong."

"Sorry to contradict you, Barney. Of course this is in confidence—and if you are the man I think, it is safe enough with you. Whether he knows it or not, I am going to tell you that the time may come when he and I will have to pull on the different ends of the string, and perhaps to the death. But I will try to see you safe, all the same."

"Oi'll bate ye not."

"And why?"

"Beca'se Barney Kain is quietly ashleep in bid, an' Oi'm Gintle Jack meself. Good-noight."

And with a laugh the speaker turned and vanished, leaving McCarthy puzzled, and not nearly half-convinced that he had been hearing the truth by way of a night-cap.

CHAPTER XV.

HANDY HANK TURNS HONEST, AND THE OTHER LADY IN THE CASE IS ON HAND.

OF course Mr. Armstrong was not dead when he was so unceremoniously bundled away from his prison pen. There was even some truth in the description of his condition as given by Elmer Conroy; yet he exaggerated the acuteness of the fallen man's senses. It was true that Jack heard a buzzing of voices, and perhaps heard the words plainly enough, but they seemed to come to him in a dream; and there was little likelihood that he would ever recognize the tones of the woman in his waking moments—if any came to him.

And that he would be permitted to revive seemed quite problematic. The two men staggered away with their load, but Conroy did not follow. He and the young woman remained behind, apparently well assured that their agents understood their duty, and would do it.

If they could have followed they might not have felt quite so certain of the trustiness of their methods. Fifty yards away the fellows halted and dumped Mr. Armstrong to the ground without much regard to his bones.

"I say, Hank, I can't say that I like this a bit, and I have a mind to kick. There is rustle enough around Doubledeck, with everybody on the watch for what is going on at night. These here mysteries are getting a little too much for the boys. If they should find us loaded up with a stiff it kind of strikes me that they would put us up a tree before we could say Jack Robinson. I move we quit."

"Quit goes, if there is a starter in his pockets. Hanged if I ain't getting tired of being made a dog of; and this here is too good a man to be bundled into the drink. Perhaps, if we were to leave word with him that we did him a good turn, he might tot it up to our account, and some day make it square with us."

"Some day! Thunder! *The man is dead!*"

"Not much—yet. And the boss knows him from 'way back, and ain't so sure that he is going to croak. Didn't you catch on to what he said? If we drop him there is a chance that he comes around; and it's pretty sure that we have the finishing touches to put on before he goes over the range. Let's see what's in his pockets, anyhow."

As coolly as though it was an every-day bit of business they turned Jack's pockets inside out.

For men such as they were the result was, or ought to have been, gratifying. Although they did not discover a mine of wealth, there was a pocketbook that contained several hundred dollars. That was the sum total of all the spoils to be found on his person. There were no papers of any kind, and even his revolver, watch and chain were missing.

Yet the two rascals did not seem as highly gratified as one would have supposed. They looked over the money with a dubious air, and then stared at each other.

"I tell you, pard, there's something wrong about this thing. The boss has been through him first; and what did he leave all this for? He's not generally so generous; and it 'pears to me that I smell a trap. What shall we do about it?"

"It looks to me as if the old man was tired seeing us about and left enough to take us down into the new diggings. That's what I make out of it, and the question that is agitating my mind is whether we should take it and go; or whether we should put it back on him, and dump him down the shaft according to orders."

"Something in that. If he's trying us it would make us solid with him, if we did that last, and that's a fact. Then, again: if he don't want us 'round, it might be mighty unhealthy for him to find us this time to-morrow. He don't generally hint more than once, and then he lets drive. There's no more foolishness about him than there is in a mule's hind legs."

"I reckon he knew we would take the coin anyhow; and if we took it we would light. It's not enough to divy with him."

"And supposing we just drop this fellow down the wrong place, and give him a chance for his white alley? Do you think the old man would find it out soon enough, or care enough, to follow us down to Mexico to get the account even?"

"Maybe not; but then, there is the chance of meeting him some other time—maybe ten years from now. He's not the forgetting kind, and would drop a man as quick as a wink whenever he found him."

"Oh, well! If he lets us run for ten years he can ruffle his hackles as high as he wants to. Both of us will be hung long enough before that time. Tell you what we will do. We will toss up for it. How will you have it: heads or tails? If I win we carry it out according to orders. If you hit the turn we leave him right where he lies, and let the old man clean up his own mess."

I am tired of this blind work. We don't get enough out of it to keep us in rum; and there hasn't been enough made on the road to call for a divy. A fellow might as well turn honest and be done with it."

"Nuff ced. Toss up your coin. Heads it is!"

The coin was spinning in the air when the fellow called, and they both bent eagerly over, trying to decipher in the moonlight what was to be the fate of their prisoner.

"Heads, sure enough. That settles it. We're a pair of honest men, and the boss may go to blazes. If this cove isn't dead yet I'm sorry for him. He is going to have a cold night of it. Just wait a moment until I put a pillow under his head. He may as well be comfortable, stiff or no stiff."

He spoke with a laugh. There was very little of the tender-hearted about Handy Hank, and he acted as though he was rather ashamed of the role of Good Samaritan; but the truth was that the cool manner of the little sport had made so deep an impression on him that he could not help doing something to show it. There was a good-sized flat stone lying near by, and this he placed under Armstrong's neck, and on that, as a cushion, he doubled up the tail of Armstrong's coat. Then, with a last look at the white face that was turned up to the moonlight, and seemed most certainly to belong to a dead man, he strode from the spot, followed by his pard.

The place was so lonely, the hour so late, that it did not seem as though there was the least chance of the body being found before morning, if even then. Elmer Conroy might, indeed, come that way, and of that they had to take the chances.

If they had come back in a minute or so they would have been more than surprised to see that the improbable had happened, and that Jack Armstrong was no longer alone in the dingle. Hardly had they turned away when there was a slight rustling in the bushes, and a human figure stole out into the open.

What was stranger, the figure appeared to be that of a boy. What could he be doing prowling around at this time of night?

The lad acted cautiously, however. For some little time there was no further movement, until the last faint sound of the receding footsteps had died away in the distance. Then he glided forward with a step so light that it hardly seemed to belong to a boy, either; and the face that bent over the prostrate man had a beauty about it, disguised though it might be, that Handy Hank, had he seen it, would have sworn belonged to a woman.

Nor would he have been mistaken.

A woman it was, and one who fortunately had the courage for the situation. She did not shrink from the corpse-like figure, but, hastily bending down, placed her hand over Jack's heart, and waited eagerly to see if she could feel the beating that belonged to life.

It was there! Faintly, very faintly, throbbed the heart of Jack Armstrong just then; and a less careful observer might not have noticed the pulsation. A sigh of satisfaction, and then her hand ran lightly over his head in quest of a wound.

Of course she found none, and so set to work to revive him, in a steady, sensible way, that told what nerve she really had. With a bottle of smelling-salts and a small pocket-flask of whisky, she thought herself competent for the case, and made no mistake about it, either. In a few moments Jack began to show signs of returning consciousness. The action of his heart became steadier and stronger; a little shiver ran all through his frame, and, in short, before long he sat up and looked around in a dazed sort of way, as though he had totally forgotten what had happened to him.

"Don't be in a hurry to talk," whispered the woman, as she saw that he was about to speak. "You have just had an escape of some kind, and there is plenty of time to tell about it when you get your breath. The ruffians who had you are far enough away by this time, and there is nothing to fear. I will not leave you until you are strong enough to look after yourself."

Armstrong gave a faint laugh, that was little better than a gurgle.

"Don't stop unless it's convenient, madam. I assure you that I am not afraid, even if you leave me alone in the dark. I am not exactly one of that kind. But how did he come to loosen his grip? The sky might have tumbled and surprised me less."

"I do not know anything about it, save that you were in the hands of two ruffians, who seemed to be after no good when I first clapped eyes on them, as they were bending over you, searching your pockets. After that they had some little talk together, and finally went away and left you, after making you as comfortable as they could. Very kind and thoughtful villains they were; but it will be just as well for you not to see them again until you get your strength back. If they saw you on your feet they might not be so tender-hearted."

"Oh, I guess they were not the worst fellows in the world. I begin to remember something more about it. They were only the dogs, who jumped as their master shook his finger. It is

their boss that I will be after when I get my wind again. But, who are you, and how did you get here? You are hardly the woman who came with him to see the dead man. And it seems odd to see another woman out here this time of night. Lucky chance for me, whoever you may be, that you were about."

"Yes, lucky enough; though I did not have the unpleasant work on my hands that I was at first half-afraid of. For a little time I thought I would have to shoot. If the man knew how near he was to losing the top of his head when he was talking so coolly about what disposition should be made of you, he might think he had made a lucky escape."

Then she began to explain how it was that she was there just at the time to do the most good. But to understand that, it is necessary to go back a little, and note something more of what was going on in the early part of the evening.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OTHER CLAIMANT.

"So the fair Lillian has arrived? Really, I don't know which to admire 'most, her courage—or some other things that it may be as well not to speak of just yet. What does she look like? I have curiosity enough to call on her if it were not for the fact that she might recognize me at some future time, when it would not be so pleasant. We will have to depend on the eyes of another; and those eyes are never as good as your own, even if one is half-blind."

The speaker was a little woman of both youth and beauty, who would have won the confidence, and perhaps the heart, of most any man at first sight.

In height she was a good deal under the average female, but so well was she proportioned that a casual observer—if such a thing could be, in connection with her—would not have noticed it unless there happened to be one of the sex present with whom to institute a comparison.

Her face was fair—wonderfully fair, for Western winds and sunshine are terrifically trying on a blonde. Her hair was a rich golden; and there was a perfect wealth of it. Her eyes were large, and a melting blue. Her nose was a perfect Grecian. Her face was a strange compound of innocence and fun in its expression. Sometimes one, and sometimes the other, predominated; but always both expressions could be traced there.

And then she lost nothing in appearance from her dress. It was a short walking costume, made from soft yet serviceable material, that fitted her figure exactly, and yet gave room for freedom of movement; and perhaps made her appear smaller than she really was. It also showed the tiniest of feet, and the most neatly turned ankles that could be imagined. Probably not one man out of a dozen who saw her would, the first time at least, notice how she was clad; and yet they would all have gone away vowing that her costume was perfection—which is, after all, real perfection, in masculine minds at least.

Her auditor was as great a contrast as could well be imagined. Tall, rugged, with a face that was hard as flint itself, Tom Raymond was as little like a man who would be able to fascinate a woman such as Hebe Haywood seemed to be; and yet, there was something more than ordinary friendship in the way her dove eyes rested on him as she spoke:

"The less you depend on eyesight at all, the better," said the other, in a cold sort of way that was oddly at variance with the bantering tone of the woman.

"It makes no difference what she looks like. We know what she is here for, and that is enough. She wants to be choked off. If it can't be done in one way we will have to try another, and about all that we want is to be able to point her out—to be able to know her when we see her, perhaps, though the less our eyesight is rung into the affair the better. If she disappeared to-night, and never was heard from again, it would suit our book better than anything else that I know of. If she inquires around too much there may be some developments that will make the work all the harder."

"That is the way with you, Tom. You are in a hurry to get your work done, and have no eye to the artistic. Now, sir, I really want her to do some inquiring. Fools and children sometimes blunder upon a heap of wisdom; and who knows what points she might discover for us? You must know that there is a great deal that we might learn with profit about the Lord family—things that you as his whilom partner should have been better posted on. Why, bless my soul, there is the one question of how did he die, and where. You are going on the supposition that he is dead, and you would have his daughter believe that he is buried. I really do not feel so certain that he is either. It would be awkward, to say the least, to have a resurrection miracle, with the worthy mine-owner and embryonic millionaire coming to life just when we were about to meet with the success that we deserve in putting his wealth where we are sure that it will do the most good. It would necessitate his removal for a second time, and in a manner that, say what you will, is mighty

hard to cover up so that no traces would be left. You talk 'way around those questions when they are asked, and I haven't been able to make up my mind whether or not you know anything about the matter. Speak up, once, and tell me the truth. Do you know that Stephen Lord is dead?"

"What sort do you take me for, to think that I would let you go into a thing of this kind—to say nothing of myself—without perfect assurance that there was going to be no coming back?"

"That is all right, in its way; but it don't hit the point I am after. I don't gamble three cents' worth on assurances; what I want is knowledge."

"Wouldn't it be just as well if you were content with my assurances, and let the question of knowledge alone? It may be a heap handier for you some day, if you know nothing at all about it. As for the rest—I want you to be safe, whatever comes. I intend to be the only one to run any risk."

"That's like the dear, unselfish fellow. Wants to shoulder all the danger, and let me into the part that is all peaches and cream. Why, I sometimes almost believe that he killed the man himself."

If anything like a change could come into that rugged face it came just then; yet the girl, who was watching him keenly, could not decide whether it was a shadow from within or from without, that appeared for an instant, and then slipped away. When he spoke his voice gave no sign that he was either startled or worried by the charge. He was not a man to wear his feelings on his sleeve.

"When you know me better you will not make such a charge, even in jest; though I do not say what I might not be willing to do for you if you asked me. If I had killed Stephen Lord I would have told you. I only heard of his death, but I am sure there can be no doubt of it. I might ask you a question, but I am afraid that I do not want to hear it answered—yet. Let the matter rest as it is, and come down to business. What do you propose?"

For answer Hebe took him by the shoulders and gazed into his face with a searching look, her eyes running over every feature. Then she stepped back, laughing.

"It won't do. I had a half-formed idea that the simplest way would be to have you make love to her, and find out what she is after. There can't be two daughters of Stephen Lord in the field, and her secrets would be worth the knowing. But she wouldn't have you. You see, she couldn't start off with the knowledge of what a good man you can be; and you have never saved her life, or done anything else that gave you a claim on her favorable consideration. You will have to keep in the background, and if any one is to skirmish at the front it must be Hebe Haywood."

"And I say, no. You cannot know what a fight for a mine can be. It may bring you death at any time. Why would you not remain in the distance and allow me to attend to your claims? Can you not trust me?"

"Perhaps. If I was to say so, no doubt you would kill the woman; but that is not what I want. I don't believe that you ever killed a woman, especially a young and handsome one. You can see for yourself that I am not far wrong when I say that it is not exactly the sort of thing for you to begin. It might go on till it ended with myself, if you once got in the way of it. No. If I can get to her I think I can see to it that she never again will trouble us."

"Very well. Have it to suit yourself. It is lucky that we found out, even at the last moment, that she was on the way. But you understand that there is not much time left us to consider. She will not waste any, but get to her work at once. And the first claimant in the field has all the better chances, even if we know how rank an impostor she must be."

"Keep your opinions—I have mine. It may not be so easy to get to her if she keeps herself indoors. The thing might be done, but we are hardly ready to storm the Home. Yet I will try to call on her, anyhow I may get to see her, and if I do, can get some sort of an idea about her plans or I am no true woman. If it is necessary I can amuse her with a story that will keep her quiet for the present. If we could send her off on a false scent there might be a chance that she would never come back again, don't you know?"

"Yes, I know. She wouldn't, because, perhaps, she couldn't. But the very fact of your having called on her might have some significance hereafter."

"Let me alone for that. I think neither she nor any one else will ever be able to say just who that caller was; and if a breath of suspicion points my way I am willing that we should lose all lot and parcel in the wealth that was Stephen Lord's."

"So be it. You would talk my senses out of me at any time, so what is the use for me to object? Do you want me to go along?"

She laughed a silvery, ringing laugh. "You seem to have a great interest in this woman, whom you profess to know nothing at

all about. If I was suspicious I might think that you had intended to bolster up your claim in the outset, and threw her over when I came along. Or perhaps you are her ally all the way along. Want you to go along. Of course not. There would be no getting over that figure. All Doubledeck would know that you had been there, and would be wanting to know what for. Let me alone, and to-morrow I will give you the latest reports from the seat of war. She will never know me again, and all the town might see me going and be none the wiser. You will open your eyes when you know what a gay little deceiver I can be."

The man looked sadly at her.

"I seldom know when you are in earnest about anything; and least of all about the things I am most earnest about. If it was not that you seem so earnest about this, I would say, let the whole thing go. I have wealth enough for both. I have prospered of late years, and do not care to let you run these risks. Don't you know that if this woman is an impostor—"

"If? Why, don't you know that she is?"

"Let it go at that, then. This impostor will have backers, who would slay you on sight if they could thereby close your mouth. Suppose that I lose you? What would a million be worth without you? Do you really want the wealth that was Stephen Lord's, or is this quest just part of the frolic that you seem to be making out of life? I believe if I were to lose you at last I would go mad, and we would both die."

"Fudge! what would I want of a man that did not think as I said, and who could not and did not help me along through the rough ways of this very wicked world? You are on trial, sir! Prove yourself worthy of Hebe Haywood, and you know what your reward will be. And shrink if you dare, and it is the last you ever will see of me. That puts it as plainly as you want to hear it, and every word truth, too."

"But why wait for this other claimant to put in her demand? Why not be first on the carpet?"

"Because Stephen Lord was murdered, and there is the chance that the party who is to make this false fight may be the ones who did my father to death. Shall I drive them back to the darkness; or shall I let them unmask? Ah, I will have revenge first, and the wealth afterward; or I touch not the millions at all. Now, go away! You have heard the truth, such as I had not intended to tell it, for a time at least. It may explain some things you have wondered at, and convince you of what you have dared to express a doubt—that I am the daughter of my father, and that he was Stephen Lord."

Raymond would have answered her, but she stopped him with an imperious gesture. Then, with a kindlier motion she held out her hand, he clasped it with a long, lingering pressure, and went away.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW GENTLE JACK CAME TO RETURN TO LIFE.

WHEN Tom Raymond had gone Miss Haywood became a different sort of a young lady altogether. The smile went out of her eyes, and her face seemed to age half a dozen years in an instant. She looked toward the door, and her ears followed the light sound of his retreating footsteps, but her thoughts were somewhere else, as she sat for a little, with her hands in her lap. Then she braced herself with a shiver.

"To think that I should work hand in glove with him, having such suspicions as I do! It makes me faint and weak sometimes. If I only could get the truth out of him; but, he was not born yesterday, either. If he has any confidences that he does not care about sharing, he knows how to keep them to himself. But, time will reveal them yet, when a woman's wit is all the while at work to find them out. Let it go for the present. Just now I must get ready for the interview with the other party."

In a place like Doubledeck it was no easy matter for a woman such as Hebe Haywood to call at the Home without attracting attention. As an offset she had determined that if attention was called to any one it should be to the wrong woman. When she was done with her make-up it would have been hard for even Tom Raymond to recognize her, in the little, bent, tottering old woman, who crept out quietly into the street, and turned her steps toward the hotel.

If this woman did not resemble Miss Haywood, she did look like Martha Doam, who had lived for a short time in a little cabin on the outskirts of the town.

Martha was something of a character, and something of a mystery. She was sometimes spoken of as a witch, in that careless sort of way that is common among people who do not believe in such things at all. Hebe had seen her several times on the street by daylight, and had provided for the assumption of the character. As she was seldom seen after nightfall, the masquerade was reasonably safe; and it was not likely there would be any surprise at what the supposed Martha Doam might do.

By what seemed great good luck, Hebe met with no one on the way—at least until she reached the neighborhood of the Home, when

no one would be likely to guess by what route she had come. When she appeared at the rear door, and asked if it was true that a young lady by the name of Lord was stopping there, she was met with a growled assent.

"Tell her that an old woman, who knows something of her family, wants to see her. I will wait here until I hear what she says."

"You may have to wait a good while," was the curt answer. "She went out some time ago, and hasn't got back yet. More than that, we don't know when she is coming. Better call around to-morrow."

As the man—who was employed in the line of general utility, and at different times exercised the functions of bell-boy, hostler, waiter, and messenger—furnished this information, he turned his head over his shoulder to listen to a distant shout; and then, without more ado, gave the door a swing, and hurried away.

There was no reason to doubt the correctness of his statement, and Hebe turned back but little wiser than when she came. Still, it was something to know that Miss Lord was wasting no time; and it was important to know whither she went, and whom she saw.

Miss Haywood had not been long in Doubledeck—where she boarded with a woman named McGallagan, who accepted her money, asked no questions, and was discreetly silent at all times in regard to her lodger. Nevertheless, Miss Hebe was well acquainted with the inns and outs of the town, which, without attracting much attention, she had managed pretty thoroughly to explore.

Her only acquaintance thus far was Tom Raymond, and no one suspected that they had come to the place together.

Shortly after Martha Doam went into the McGallagan domicile, a boy came out. He was a chubby urchin, of possibly fourteen or fifteen, so far as looks went, and seemed perfectly at home in the ragged and not very cleanly suit of clothes that he sported—and which were not then donned for the first time, either. A boy of that size would not be apt to attract much attention in Doubledeck after dark. The men who were abroad at that hour were attending to their own business, in which boys had very little part.

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack to start in search of Miss Lord; but the character of the boy had its advantages. Inquiries could be made, and reasonable excuses made for them, that could not work any harm hereafter. If the fraud was ever discovered, who was to tell who worked it, and for what?

There was one man who gave a sharp, quick glance at the boy; but he said nothing, and did not take a second look. The man was Mr. Armstrong; and the action was almost mechanical. In another moment he had forgotten the meeting.

She also saw two men crouching in the shadows, evidently lurking there for no good, but their business was nothing to her so long as they kept their distance.

It was not altogether easy to make outside inquiries; and as to inside, she might as well make up her mind to begin at the first house she came too and rap at every door. Miss Lord was as apt to be in one house as another.

And yet, by a piece of sheer good luck, the trail was found, after some time spent in strolling around, with an occasional question; and the track led straight to the saloon kept by Mart Walker, which Hebe knew was the resort of some of the worst of the bad citizens of Doubledeck.

Here was a surprise; but Hebe Haywood did not hesitate. A boy could venture where a woman could not—and at Mart's the feminine part of his congregation was always defended from insult; and anything like it promptly avenged. For this there was a selfish reason, since the life of the place lay in keeping its feminine patrons in attendance. Without its music and dancing the profits would have shrunk fast enough.

Yet it was singular that on the first night in town Miss Lord should turn her steps toward a place of so questionable a reputation. Hebe determined to follow, and see if something could not be learned of the reason for it.

Just as she was about to enter there arose a tumult within that made her reconsider her determination, and stand outside, in some doubt whether her best course would not be to execute an immediate retreat.

For a little while pandemonium seemed to be breaking loose within. The lights were extinguished, the noise of curses, blows, and finally pistol-shots, told that a fierce struggle of some kind was going on inside. She was about to move away when the tumult slackened, and an instant later heard the light footsteps of two men, moving away from the building; while almost at the same moment a female figure brushed past her, that instinct seemed to tell her belonged to the very person of whom she was in pursuit. Without more ado Hebe followed.

It really was an aimless sort of wandering, after having beaten a retreat from Mart's; and Hebe could see that all the time the woman in advance was looking for some one.

"Just as I thought," muttered Hebe. "The

woman is an adventuress all over, and expected to meet one of her accomplices there. Probably she is looking for him on the street, and if I follow her I will be able to see who is backing her up in the game. I know that she is an impostor; but it would be another point gained to find out just what sort of evidence she is going to hatch up, to show that she is entitled to the wealth that one day will be—ours."

It was not so hard for a seeming boy to follow without attracting attention, and when Hebe was almost despairing of the adventure amounting to anything, she saw the woman halt suddenly and stand, looking straight forward in an attitude of attention.

There was no one in sight, and it almost seemed as though the action was a freak, without reason.

But just in time to sink down out of sight, Miss Haywood heard light footsteps almost in her rear, and a man passed her, with a rapid, gliding movement. He held one hand somewhat upraised, and stretched toward the woman whose form was distinctly visible at some little distance beyond, and who finally, at a gesture, as the new-comer approached her, turned slowly around.

As her eyes fell upon the man she gave a start, whether of pleasure or surprise it was hard to tell, and then advanced with her hand also extended, and a few words of greeting. Evidently she had found the right person at last.

Hebe would have been glad to have heard those first few words, but was unfortunately too far away, and it was almost impossible to get closer for the present without being seen. She remained where she had crouched, watching the actions of the two. After a few words more they moved away; and she followed, at a gradually lessening distance.

The course led out of town, and was, in fact, the one already described as taken by Gentle Jack and his captors. It was a little hard to follow when the desolate region around the underground retreat was reached, but it was also easier to get nearer without being observed, and so it was that Hebe had a fair chance to see the two disappearing as though they were sinking into the ground.

That put a stop to following. No doubt it was dangerous to get in the way of these two people, yet it seemed like giving up a chance to go away. She was trying to make up her mind what was best to do when she heard the voices of several persons approaching, and cowered back into the shadow of a convenient rock, while Armstrong and his conductor followed the lead of the two who had lately descended into the underground retreat.

From a few words heard as they passed her, Hebe was of the opinion that the one was a captive, though he did not seem to be at all anxious over his position.

Here was something else to unravel. Was this man to be an accomplice of the conspirators, or their victim? Again Hebe decided to linger there. So far it seemed that she had been fortunate in her undertaking. A man who skulked, as this one, who was evidently of importance to the woman who claimed to be Lillian Lord, would not be very dangerous if one could lay bare the secret of his life.

She waited for some time without seeing or hearing anything more. She even ventured to look for the hidden stairway that she had good reason to know existed. If she did not find it she saw where, beyond a doubt, it was concealed, and was certain that in daylight, with nothing to fear, she could find it. Then she got back to her place behind the rock, just in time to escape the eyes of two men who came up out of the ground at the identical spot she had been examining.

Between them they carried a burden, that was evidently the body of a senseless man. Hebe wondered if it could be that of the person who had lately gone down into the ground as a prisoner. She determined to see. If the man was not dead, he could now tell some of the secrets of the hiding-place below.

The two men turned off sharply from the route by which she had reached the spot, and plunged deeper into the shadows of rocks and forest, though they followed what was a seldom-used trail. Finally they laid their burden down and began to talk. She stole nearer without making a sound that could reach their ears, and heard every word, saw the game for life and death, and finally was able to bring to life the half-dead Mr. Armstrong.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JACK ARMSTRONG ASKS THE JUDGE AN IMPORTANT QUESTION.

"WELL, everything goes, and I suppose that it is all for fun," said Jack, when—so far as it related to him—the story of his rescuer had been finished.

"I am not as strong as I would like to be when I meet the gentleman who put me into this box, but I think if I had no other accounts to settle with him, I would be ready to go my death as it is to get even, and would give a thousand to have him here right now. As I understand, you have a prospect for a little difficulty in that

direction. If so, and you need any help, count me in on your side, from the ground floor, up."

"Thank you, ever so much, but I am not sure that I can accept your help without other complications that would upset my plans entirely. If you wish to be of any real assistance to me, will you try to find out something about that man who seems to be the leader of the band of spirits that congregated in that den, and meantime let him alone? You will only have to hold your vengeance a little while, and, meantime, you may help me to both vengeance and wealth. There is little danger of his running away, for I believe that he has interests here that would hold him at the risk of his life."

"I don't know his name or game just now, but once he was Elmer Conroy, and a villain from 'way back."

"When he knows that I have escaped him, he will be pretty well aware that if he lingers he will sooner or later have me holding dead level on him. And he don't need any one to tell him that when I pull trigger somebody drops."

"That last is what I am afraid of. If the man is killed—Well, perhaps I am wrong. I did think I must know what his game was before he was taken off, but perhaps it would save me trouble if you got your shot at him. If he comes in your way I ask no promises, but I would like you to assure me that you will not go out of your way to meet him. I know well enough that he is a villain now; but must know in what way."

"You are cool enough about it, anyhow. I have waited some time as it is, and I reckon that there is no particular rush now. I wouldn't mind giving him a little preliminary shaking up; so, if it is any particular accommodation to you, I will spare him—for a while. And now, if I find myself able to walk—as I believe that I will when I stretch a bit—I think I will be getting back to Doubledeck, and my virtuous couch. You might as well be getting out of this yourself. The man you are spying on would as soon kill a woman as a man, and you have seen what he thinks about the latter operation. I don't want to leave you wandering around here; and really, the night air is not good for my lungs."

"No doubt I may seem wicked enough to you, but I have reason to think the man is mixed up in affairs that affect me deeply. At the very present he is trying to do me an injury, and if he knew me as I am, and could meet me, I have no doubt that he would slay me fast enough. But it was in regard to the woman who was his companion that I was even more anxious to learn something. However, I doubt if there is anything to be learned here for the present, at least, and so I will walk toward town with you, though we must not be seen on the streets together. It might cost you dear. You appear to be a stranger in the town, like myself; but there would no doubt be some abroad who would recognize both of us, and the chances are that I would meet the one who, of all others, I would be most anxious to avoid. Are you sure that your strength is equal to the journey?"

"Fix it to suit yourself. I am strong enough for 'most anything in reason, and would be a heap stronger if the condemned scoundrels had not taken away my derringers."

"And your money," added Miss Haywood, without any hesitancy. "If the latter loss will occasion you any inconvenience, will you allow me to supply you until you can get your finances in shape? I have plenty and to spare. Somehow I feel that you are going to be of service to me, and I am willing to show my gratitude beforehand."

"Don't worry about my wealth; there is more where that came from. As for gratitude, that is all belonging on the other side. If it had not been for you, you can imagine what sort of a night I would have spent, to say nothing of the great hereafter. Then, I am on common ground with any one who hates Elmer Conroy, and though I claim the right of vengeance as between me and my friends, I will always be around to stand between them and any schemes of his. I have been talking more in earnest to you than I have talked to any one save Barney since the year one and a half. Either you are good medicine or bad, and I am willing to let the future show which it is. Now let us be going. When you get tired of my company you can stand still and let me go on. Until then you might explain how it comes that you and Elmer Conroy are to have a fight, and I can give you a hint or two as to what sort of a man he is in a tussel. He is a very bad man, I assure you; and if you can find any one to take him off of your hands, you ought to be glad and thankful."

"And so I would be, no doubt, if I knew what shape it would leave the rascally scheme that I am sure is afoot to rob me of the wealth that should be mine. Yet, as that wealth is already in the hands of a man who may object to giving it up, it is possible that Conroy, as you call him, might fight my battles, to my advantage, for a while. When he was done showing the proofs that the wealth did not belong where it now is I might come forward and show where it does belong. You see, I am willing to look after my own interests in any way that seems best adapted to reach the end."

"Thanks for your confidence. I wouldn't wonder if you should win. If one fights fire with

fire, and gets the work in at the right season, it makes a pretty safe game to bet on. I have tried it, and ought to know."

So, after a desultory fashion, the conversation went on until they had almost reached the limits of the town, neither overwhelming the other with confidences. Then the girl halted.

"It is not that I cannot trust to your prudence, but simply to tell you what I desire, that I ask you to make no mention of any part that I have had in your adventures of the night. I do not wish attention drawn toward myself; and for the present there is a reason why I should not seem to be an acquaintance of yours. If I have done you any little favor it may excuse my making such a request. Good night."

As Miss Haywood extended her hand quite cordially Jack took her at her word, evincing no annoyance at the request. He shook hands with her, and then went on his way, reaching the Home without further adventure, and something like an hour after Barney had parted for the night with the manager of the Gray Mare Mine. He retired at once, and this time nothing kept him awake. He did not know or now care who the lady of the stage might be, but he was certain that she was a confederate of Elmer Conroy, and consequently his foe.

"I wonder who the poor devil was whom they really expected?" was the thought that floated across his mind, and before he got to trying to frame an answer he fell asleep.

The next morning he had a full account from Barney of his adventures in the saloons the preceding evening, and of the attack on McCarthy, with the confidences that followed.

"An' sure, an' Oi hope yez will be afther pardonin' me for the liberty Oi took wid yer name, but Oi thought it wor as well to be givin' him somethin' to think ov; an' Oi had been howldin' up me end all avenin' az well az the Hoigh Roller himsilf."

"All right, Barney; but I don't want you sailing under my flag too often. You may have made a ten-strike last night, but the next time it might be something else. Wonder what Mister McCarthy has against your humble servant? The men that are down on me seem to be about as thick as Smiths in purgatory. I don't remember ever hurting his toes."

"Sure, an' don't ye say it's ownly he's afear'd that you will? An' mebbe it will be az will to watch thim same toes. It's the roight hand man he is av Judge Haddington; an' he's the bist mon in town."

"Ah, that accounts for it! The confounded fool has an idea that I have something in for him, and means to fight me from the send-off. I reckon I will go over and see what he has to say for himself. There is nothing like taking the bull by the horns. He may have had something to do with last night's racket, but I hardly think so. If he did I will know it about the time I get him talking."

"Mebbe he won't be so free wid his talk. Av Oi wor you Oi would take it aisy for a while, till ye say phat he wor goin' to do; an' joost go on milkin' av the town."

"Business is business, and when I am on it I don't generally fool away my time. You can keep quiet about last night, saying nothing one way or the other, as to who it really was that was around town. Of course, if the judge was in the racket they played on me he will find out that you lied most unmitigatedly when you spoke to McCarthy; but that will make no difference, and perhaps pave the way for me to get in some work later on. And now I think of it, I wonder if he wasn't the victim really expected."

It did not seem worth while for Mr. Armstrong to give Barney a history of his own adventures of the night before, though he hinted that he had been through a mill of some kind. When the morning was pretty well advanced he went out in search of Judge Haddington, and information in regard to the Gray Mare Mine.

The judge was never very hard to find during what might be called business hours. He was either at the mine or at his office in town. This morning he was at the office, Sunday though it might be.

The appearance of Jack Armstrong did not seem to be either delightful or a surprise; but the judge received him with a cold civility that might have been trying to the nerves of some men, but was altogether lost on the sport. The latter took the offered chair, and dropped into it after the lazy manner of a man who had come to stay, and did not consider that he needed any excuse, either.

"Quite a comfortable little crib you have here. Wouldn't care if I owned a mine myself, to fall back on when other things tired. Furniture not quite up to some that I have seen, but fair for a place like Doubledeck. I suppose it keeps the boys out. They wouldn't care to intrude for fear of spoiling the carpet."

It was a snug little room; and furnished after a style that was not generally in vogue in Doubledeck and the surrounding towns. From any one else Haddington would have heard its praise with pleasure; from the sport the commonplace remark was a signal of danger. So, at least, it seemed to the magnate, who scowled, and gave a grunt that indicated he was not disposed to listen to his visitor unless he had some-

thing to say of more importance than critical remarks about his furniture. As Mr. Armstrong lolled back, and lit a cigar in a manner that indicated he had come to an anchorage, the judge broke the silence.

"I suppose, of course, you have come on business. My time is pretty well taken up, and I have no leisure to talk anything else. If you are only in for a lounge you will excuse me if I go on with my work."

And he turned to a pile of papers that lay convenient to his elbow.

"That's the way for a busy man to talk. There is no use to monkey around the bush when a bore drops in—and before I leave Doubledeck I have no doubt you will think I am the biggest kind of a nuisance. It's an actual fact that I did come in to see you on what some people might call business; but there is no rush about it. I can take my time, and look around on the outside a little. Perhaps I can pick up some useful knowledge in that way, and know better what it is I want to ask you about this mine of ours. You understand that I have an interest in it, and will be apt to take a great deal more before I am done with it."

"I don't understand anything of the kind. If you hold any shares, as you yesterday declared, your interests will be protected, sure enough; but I can warn you that the rest of the stockholders will not allow any interference with the conduct of the work. If you show that you are bound to give trouble you will find that the holder of twenty-five shares is just as good as any of them as long as he behaves himself; but if he tries to raise trouble there are ways of freezing him out too quick. You have a very unenviable reputation, Mr. Armstrong, and a gentleman will think twice before he descends to bickering with you, but you cannot ride over us rough-shod, simply because you are an acknowledged expert with pistol and deck."

The judge spoke in a short, crusty way, that showed how his feelings were, and as his right hand had dropped below the top of the desk level it was fair to suppose that he had a weapon ready, and was expecting that his remarks might produce the opportunity to use it.

There was no more change in Mr. Armstrong's face than the judge would have seen in the wall if he had talked to it. If he was the desperado the words made him out he was certainly one of the smiling sort.

"My dear Haddington, you seem to have taken an unaccountable dislike to me, or else are obstinately bent upon a difficulty. Now, I never take dislikes, and I never get angry. My reputation, as you have observed, is firmly established, and I can afford to wait long enough for any one who does either of those things to put himself undoubtedly in the wrong. It may be that I will have to kill you before this thing is all adjusted; if I do I am open to a wager that I will be so thoroughly in the right that any coroner's jury would declare that you went over the range from a visitation of Providence, and that it served the critter right. That is just exactly the kind of a man that I am. What I want more particularly to ask—and it is in the interests of others who have a right to know, as well as for myself—where did you get your title to what you call the Gray Mare Mine, and what is it good for?"

CHAPTER XIX.

AND THE JUDGE GETS A POINTER IF HE CHOOSES TO TAKE IT.

THE straightforward question brought the judge around immediately. He actually appeared to forget who asked it, and was all business at once.

"Has any one dared to say that there is any doubt about the title to the mine? If you look over the records you will find it all straight as a string. Runs right back to the original locator. There can't be the shadow of a doubt on the validity of the title."

"Strikes me I have heard that the original locator had a partner. What has become of his interest? As near as I can make out from what they told me his name don't appear on the books."

"Don't see that it makes any difference if the locator sold the whole right and title, and there is nothing anywhere to show that the partner ever had a legal existence."

"Then you have heard the story about the other man? I thought maybe it would be a surprise and so touched the subject lightly. The point is, he was dead when the bill of sale, on which you rest your title, was given; and the partner had no more right to pass his title than you or I. How does that strike you as a legal point? And if the Gray Mare is going to turn out such a regular bonanza as you have been letting on to the parties you were trying to interest, I needn't tell you that you want your legal points all in ship-shape. Things are coming to such a pass that the law will soon actually reach as far as Doubledeck; and if there are a few millions to fight about, it will come all the quicker."

"Yes, I have had an inkling of the story, and am glad you have spoken, since I now know who is behind the party that is hatching up some sort of a conspiracy to capture the mine. Since I

know who is backing her I can guess what sort of an impostor she is."

"Bless your soul! That is where you are away off. I didn't know that there was any claimant. I just asked the question because I knew something about this claim in the olden time, and it struck me when I heard how valuable it was going to turn out that there might be some heirs of old man Lord lurking in the background, who would come with a rush if they caught on to what might seem to be in the wood. When I was in Hard-Up I made a few inquiries that brought out the whole story, and I rather thought I was going to put you on your guard, at the same time that I satisfied myself. So the ball has opened already. What is the yarn of the other side? It may be a game after all, and if it is, my own interests would put me on your side if it looked as though we had anything like a sure thing of it."

"A very fine way to talk, Mr. Armstrong; but don't it strike you that we might as well play with hands on the board? As you came here in company with the party who claims to be the daughter of a man named Lord, who she says should have had a half interest; and as shortly after your arrival you come around asking me such questions; and as you seem to know the whole story, together with the name of old man Lord, of whom I had never heard before, is it not natural to suspect that you are one of that lady's backers, if not the chief of the conspiracy? I can hardly explain your conduct in any other way. And I tell you, right here and now, that such a game will not and cannot win. I don't care if the old man himself was to come back to life—he could not give a title that would lay over mine; and as for this woman, I am as sure as if I had read it in print that she is no relative of his, and that any claim she may make is simply a fraud, from bottom to top. You may put that in your pipe and either smoke it or carry it back to the other villains who are in the plot. I have nerve enough to fight you all; and if there is any such barefaced folly tried on it will be the worse for all hands concerned. If you haven't anything further to say you may as well take your leave, and do your loafing somewhere else. It is the last time you will be allowed to bother me with this ghost story. Hereafter I shall fight at long range, either at the mine or in the courts, just as you prefer to take it."

As has all along been said, the judge was a man of courage, and in addition he had an ugly temper when it was sufficiently stirred up.

Certainly he did not show any signs of quailing before the little sport, who was watching him with his laziest smile.

"Oh, come now, judge, you are barking up the wrong tree. I have no interest in the matter in the way that you put it; the biggest thing I have in it is that twenty-five shares, be the same more or less. Here I am, actually trying to do you a favor, and all the pay I get is seeing you feel around for a chance to use your revolver. I tell you squarely that if the young lady you mention has anything to do with any claim that has been made on you I know nothing about it. I never saw her before I got into the stage. And if she is laying claim to the Gray Mare I am willing to admit that it is most likely she is a fraud. I am willing, even, to do you a still further favor, and ask you if you ever heard of a man by the name of Elmer Conroy?"

"Of course I did, and the rascal is dead long ago. What has that to do with the Gray Mare?"

Though the judge tried to carry it off so coolly, there was no doubt but what the question of the sport moved him a good deal more than he wanted to admit. He changed color a little, and his breath came thick and hard.

"Not so very dead as you—and others—may have supposed. I do not know for a certainty that he has his eye on the Gray Mare, but I am open to a small bet on that as on most any other subject. You know what a rustler from 'way back he used to be, and you can fancy what he must be, after a season in the infernal regions. No doubt he was dead—and the Old Boy turned him loose again because he could work more wickedness here than any devil of them all. Don't you forget it. Watch for Elmer Conroy, and when you strike him you have reached the hub of the whole affair. Now, good-day. No! It is not worth while to ask me any questions. I have positively told you all I know. As far as I have gone you can rely on me; and if I talked to you an hour I could not put you up to a single point more. So-long! Perhaps I'll see you later."

When Jack had departed the judge took a little time to calmly considering the situation.

That he had been surprised at what had been told him hardly expressed the whole truth. If he could have altogether believed what he heard he would have been dumfounded. When Gentle Jack began he thought he understood the whole thing, but when he closed he hesitated to say whether he had any idea of why the sport had called on him, or whether there was the least reliance to be placed on what he said.

After the story that McCarthy had to tell him about his adventures of the previous night he

was inclined to think that this man was not as bad as he had been painted, for certainly he must have known that McCarthy was identified with his interests, and if he had been so violently his foe as he had been thinking, the sport would hardly have gone out of his way to rescue the right-hand man of the magnate of Doubledeck. He would have wisely left him to his fate. And this warning in regard to Elmer Conroy was of the same piece.

Meantime, Jack went away laughing to himself. He had obtained more information than the judge supposed, and a heap of amusement besides.

"I guess I'll let Barney go in for the coin, this trip," was his thought, "and I'll take the fun. There seems to be a chance afloat for a good deal of the latter. Wonder if I can see my fair rescuer of last night, on the street. In that rig there was not much chance to tell what she looked like, and she may think that she has the inside track on me; but I'll bet a big apple that I would know her if I saw her. From what she said it is likely enough that she is mixed up in this Gray Mare business, though I swear I can't tell how, unless there are a pair of them at the same game. I believe I made some sort of promises about backing her up; and I don't see how I could make my word good unless by taking Elmer Conroy out of the way. I'll be apt to do that the moment my eyes drop on him, and after that she and the judge can fight it out far enough to show who has the right side of the case. After that—I suppose I will help the woman. It's a way I have. The lady friend of the stage must know my weakness, by the way; though I swear I can't make out the true inwardness of her call last night, unless it was to see what I looked like, or to badger me out on the war-path. Wonder what she and that delectable partner of hers think of things this morning, and how far on their way south the gentlemen have got who were intrusted with the finishing touches to yours truly? I must keep a bright look out for all these points, and half a dozen more, and I believe the best plan as a starter would be to have a bit of confidential discourse with the young lady, who, it seems, is going to answer to the name of Lord. What the judge says goes for nothing, and she may be the Simon-Pure article, after all. In that case, if her eyes were opened to the sort of man she was dealing with, wouldn't she pull back a little in the traces? If I told her that Conroy murdered her father, if there was anything of the woman in her she would pull out from the partnership, if nothing else. If I can find her, I swear I will tell her. Funny how the old-time things are coming into play."

CHAPTER XX.

MR. ARMSTRONG QUOTES HISTORY.

GENTLE JACK'S soliloquy had brought him back to the Home, and as he either acted on an inspiration at once, or gave it up altogether, he stepped into the hotel and inquired for Miss Lord.

He had half an idea that, after the affair of the previous night, she would have changed her quarters—especially if she learned that he was around again all right and smiling. To his satisfaction she was in her own room; and when he sent in a request for an interview, she answered in person, making her appearance in the so-called "parlor" without the delay of a moment.

She looked inquiringly at the little sport, who was standing by the window, and who turned at her entrance. If he expected her to show confusion, or anything more than the ordinary tokens of recognition she would naturally have for a fellow-traveler in the coach, the preceding day, he was doomed to disappointment. She bowed distantly as she said:

"I understood that you wished to see me. As you would hardly send such a message to a lady who was a perfect stranger, without some sufficient reason, I have granted this interview, though I felt little like leaving my room. I find that the journey hither was even more tiresome than I had supposed along the road, and I have not yet recovered from the fatigue. As I have important business before me I cannot afford to be sick, and so have prescribed myself perfect rest for a day or so. What is it that you wish?"

All this was said without a tremor in the clear eyes that were looking straight at Mr. Armstrong. Considering what he knew, he thought the statement one of the most remarkable he had ever heard, and for a moment was puzzled how to begin. It was not often that he was taken aback, but this time there was some excuse.

A second's thought, a few more seconds to study the face before him, then Mr. Armstrong was himself again. If this woman chose to ignore the events of the previous night she might—for a season. Their history would come to the surface before they were done with each other.

"I understand that you are a daughter of one Stephen Lord, who was at one time a resident of this region."

"You are correct. Stephen Lord was my father, and he was one of the pioneers of this country."

"And you have come to find the fortune that he left behind him?"

"Partly."

She spoke in a slow, measured manner, showing neither interest nor vexation at the intrusion. If she wanted any information in regard to the late Mr. Lord, she made no effort to obtain it from the little sport, who was tacitly offering it.

"I don't say that you are or are not the lady you represent yourself to be; but as I knew something in regard to the gentleman, once upon a time, though I believe I never had the pleasure of making his acquaintance, I thought you would be entitled to the benefit of the information. As I understand it, you believe that your father, when he died, had a half-interest in the property now known as the Gray Mare Mine. Perhaps he did; but I can assure you that if he was to come to life and undertake it himself, there would be some trouble in reducing that interest once more to possession. What chance do you suppose you will have against the capital which will be fighting tooth and nail to retain possession?"

"Perhaps none at all; but the right sometimes does win; and that would be my hope in this case. Is this all that you have to say to me?"

"I might have heaps to say if I was certain that yours was a right that ought to triumph. You see, when a person rests a claim on its justice, it gives one the right to look a little further, and judge that so-called justice somewhat by its surroundings. Yours are not of the kind that would induce the most implicit confidence in the righteousness of your case."

"I am not sure that I understand you; but it appears to me that you must intend an insult of some kind. If that is so I warn you not to go too far. I am more liberal-minded than the most of my sex, and slower to anger, but I caution you that at the proper moment I can protect myself, and avenge insult."

"That is right. A woman who cannot say that ought not to come to Doubledeck. Lambs are out of place in the wolves' dens, unless they are there as a sacrifice. But I have no desire to insult you, nor even to call to your mind certain facts that would be sufficient excuse for what you evidently consider an intrusion. But I have a slight interest in the Gray Mare, myself; and some of my friends depend upon me to keep an eye on the property, to see that it is really the safe investment it appears to be. I naturally have an excuse for any investigation that I may make in regard to any adverse claims to the title—and I did not know positively, until this morning, that such claims had actually been made. If it was only to be a fight between the present holders and yourself, I should meet you half way in proving all that could be said in your favor. Unfortunately for you, you are in very bad hands—how bad you ought to know. You understand; I say nothing about Judge Haddington's claim that you are an impostor. I tell you simply that the man who is backing you, or leading you in this matter, and who was once known as Elmer Conroy, was then the most unprincipled rascal that ever disgraced the West. This much you know; but I want to add to it something I think you do not know, if you are really the daughter of Stephen Lord; and that is that Elmer Conroy, without a shadow of doubt, murdered your father. I would have told you this last night if I had then known who you were. If you choose to continue your partnership without first investigating the charge—and there are witnesses near at hand who no doubt could convince you beyond peradventure—I will know that either you are no daughter of Lord's, or else that you are a very unworthy one, and are not entitled to much consideration at the hands of any man that knows you as you are. That's not insult, but warning, and you had better make the most of it before it is too late."

Then Jack marched out, as though he had only meant to do his duty, and had no concern for the result; but all the same he had his eye on the woman, and in spite of her wonderful self-control he was certain that his shot had told. Some men would have wasted time remaining to hear what she could have to say for herself; but Mr. Armstrong knew better. Unless requested to remain, the time was not at hand to obtain information; and he was too sure that Elmer Conroy had her well in hand.

"And yet," he murmured to himself, "I am not so certain that in her waking moments she would not be glad enough to see him go under, even if she is an impostor, and is playing for the stakes with a cold deck under the table. We'll let that bit of information rankle in her mind until it has produced its effect, and then give her another dose."

Jack went around to his room after that, and was joined there by his man of all work.

"Sure an' ther' wor a jintleman after sphakin' wid ye, an av ye will be here in an hour or so he will be callin' ag'in."

"And who was the gentleman, and what did

he want? Hardly some one from our friend the judge. He would scarcely pluck up courage enough to call one out in a regular duel; and if it was the judge himself he would have left his name."

"I asked him to do that same, but he said he wor a sthranger in the place, an' ye wouldn't know him if he did. It wor something about what happened lasht noight, but he towld nothin more."

There was room for considerable speculation no doubt, if Armstrong had been of that kind; but he had been thinking more for the last twenty-four hours than he usually did, and was ready to take a rest.

In something less than an hour there was a rap; and at his bidding the door opened and Tom Raymond entered.

A single glance at the rugged face told the sport that the man was a stranger to him, and that he never knowingly had eyes on him before. There was nothing very cordial about the stranger either; but Jack held out his hand with a smile, and a word of greeting.

"I can't say that I wanted to make this visit," began Raymond.

"You are known to me by reputation at least, and I am sure that there is little use in bothering you with explanations about things that you will hardly think of again. And you have battles enough of your own to fight to keep you from wanting to enlist regularly in the cause of any one else, even if you might be willing enough to help on a pinch if it came in your way. Still a lady wants to set herself right on your record, and perhaps the wish is natural enough. You met her last night on the outskirts of the town or a little beyond."

"Glory!" thought Armstrong. "I know when a man looks jealous, and this is a case or I am a bigger fool than I think I look. If this young man has a chance he will pick a row with me quicker than Haddington thought of it. Unless I want to do some shooting it may be as well to handle him with gloves. He looks as though he might be a bad one to handle, and he's large enough to swallow me whole."

But audibly the sport only remarked:

"Really, if there is anything of a questionable look about the proceedings of a lady I invariably forget them as she goes out of sight. Certainly, I will not guess at what you are alluding to. And if you have heard anything of Jack Armstrong you must know that he has the reputation of being willing at any time to drop his own affairs to do a service for a member of the gentler sex."

"That is well enough to tell to me; but Miss Haywood does not feel so. The fact is she is here at a disadvantage, as she is watching the tactics of the enemy under cover, as it were, until the time comes to appear in her own proper person. It is not what I would altogether advise, but there are what seem to her to be good reasons for it. She is actually entitled to the best piece of mining property in the district; and sooner or later she will get it. Her father was Stephen Lord, who was an original partner in the Gray Mare Mine, and who mysteriously disappeared or was killed. The property is now in the hands of a man by the name of Haddington, who holds it under a bill of sale from Lord's partner."

"If it was only a question of a fight, if with the present holder, it would be useless to keep up any mystery on the subject. Unfortunately there is another Richmond in the field, in the person of a woman who also claims to be the daughter of the deceased, and who is urging her so-called rights, or will be, backed by the unscrupulous man with whom I understand you saw her last night. Until something can be done with that man, it may not be safe to have my friend reveal her true name and mission. They are people who would stop at nothing; and I have reason to believe that they have a pack of ruffians at their back who would strike as they ordered. You know something of that yourself, and can judge whether there are any grounds for apprehension."

Armstrong looked curiously at the speaker. There was nothing about that strong face to suggest the white feather, and Jack was of the opinion that Tom Raymond was the kind of a man who would rather die fighting than win by roundabout and devious ways. This story might fit a woman better; and yet it did not sound as though it came from the woman who had been brave enough in coming to his help the previous night.

There must be something behind it that he had not yet heard.

"You are right. Elmer Conroy is a bad man to fight, either openly or in secret; and yet, I should not think that a man of your stamp would allow her to lose much time in getting her hands on the Gray Mare, if it can be done at all. If it turns out to be the bonanza that has been predicted, it may take a few millions and a regiment or so of soldiers to get the ins out, title or no title. A bill of sale is a bill of sale, and, when it is found on record in the West, it is good enough for all practical purposes."

"Just what I have said; but Miss Lord has vowed that she will not soil her fingers with the mine until she has avenged the murder of her father."

CHAPTER XXI.

TOM RAYMOND BOOKS A BET.

"THAT sounds more like the thing. With a reason like that there may be some excuse for letting the money slide; but without it I need hardly tell you that the case would have a fishy look. When it is coin that persons are after, they are hardly willing to wait for it to come their way of its own accord."

"And so she is going to open the books and call Mr. Conroy to a settlement? I don't want to discourage her, or you, which I suppose is about the same thing, but don't you think that the contract is a heavy one? Old man Lord was not exactly a slouch, as I have heard it reported, and yet he could not hold his hand against that past master of badness. You will find that he will never risk his precious neck very far to the front as long as there is any danger. And he scents that last afar off."

"I have a little private account with him myself; and I swear, for all the months that I would have been happy to buff it home, I thought the scoundrel was dead. It was just luck, or because, for some reason of his own, the villain wanted to let me, that I got on his trail last night, and found that he was quite alive. It would be safe to say that Miss Lord could take him in hand whenever she could find him. Why, I have been all over this country, from one end to the other, without getting a hint that he was still living, until I came to Doubledeck. And I had my eyes wide open all the time, too. That may just be luck on his part, but I call it good management."

As Raymond did not interrupt him, Jack went on till he had run himself out of breath. When he stopped he saw that he was being closely regarded by his visitor, whose feelings it was not easy to mistake.

"That astonishes you, does it? Well, I was astonished myself. If it had not been for the young lady whom you represent, I might have been something more than astonished. Pity I didn't know more about this last night. Your friend only gave me an inkling of the truth, or I would have given her the point that if she didn't keep the trail when she had it she would not be likely to strike it again until it was too late."

"You do not understand me. The astonishment is that you speak so confidently of the man having been the slayer of Lord. Are you sure that you are pointing out the right individual?"

"Tolerably. I do not often make wild assertions. If I have made a mistake, I shall be only too happy to argue the case with the man I have wronged with any weapons he may choose to name. I was going to add that when she satisfies herself that Elmer Conroy is the gentleman she is gunning for, she can leave the matter quietly in my hands. I want to take a little time to consider the matter all over, and make up my mind what would be the most pleasant way to get even. After that you can assure your friend that he will not long cumber the ground. I'll take him off her hands, sure enough."

"No, no! That will not do at all. When she knew that the murderer of her father had indeed passed beyond her reach, she would be wild. I am not sure that you would not turn her vengeance against yourself."

"Then, in the name of all that is good, what does she want me to do?"

"Nothing at all, unless it be to give her the benefit of your wisdom."

"I have offered two or three chunks of that, and no one seems willing to take them. Unless you can persuade her to be reasonable, I am afraid she will have to think I am an ingrate, who has no conscience, and little soul. Mr. Conroy belongs to me, and I don't allow any one to interfere with my property. From what you have told me I am inclined to believe that the young lady is the genuine daughter, if such a thing exists, and as such I may be able to do her a service in regard to the matter of the mine. As to her schemes of vengeance—I am not a spadassin, and would not move a finger in them on her account. I am saving the gentleman for my own."

In spite of Mr. Armstrong's airy manner, and gentle face, he managed to get a great deal of hate into his words, and Tom Raymond understood that he was dealing with a man who was neither of the forgetting or the forgiving kind.

"He has hurt you some time. Well, if you feel that way we will not probably fight each other, since you cannot hate him more than Miss Lord does the man who killed her father. That is not the whole of his offending, either, or I am no judge of human nature, though the young lady never confided more of the affair to me than I have already spoken of."

"Oh, I can understand, without more explanation, because I know just what a man this Conroy has been. And I know something of the trouble that lay between him and Lord. Something about a woman, of course—probably the mother of the young lady. There always is a woman in the case. I have heard that so often that I am sick of it; and sickest of all because it is so true."

"Lightnings blast him! If it had not been

for Elmer Conroy my life would have been a different one, and the only woman I ever saw to care for would have been living to-day, as my wife! Do you wonder that I hate him? Mind you, he never turned his eyes on her—perhaps never knew of her existence. But he ruined her father, and then had her brother hung for a murder that he himself committed. That broke her heart; and she couldn't stay, even for me. I followed him; I always was a month or so behind on his trail; and finally thought he went to his death in an attack on the band of road-agents he commanded, and who were brought to bay in the canyons in the upper country."

"Thanks for your confidence. I can understand you better because there are some hanks like it in my own life. I only hope that there are not going to be more. I'll be somewhat frank with you, stranger though you are."

"I have been living a somewhat worthless life, because I believed that life was over for me. Lately, I have had an object. I cannot explain just how the man whom you call Conroy first came into my affairs, but he did, and if I could have located him I would have killed him fast enough. I did not take interest enough in life to grope around for him until I happened upon Miss Lord—Miss Haywood as she chose to call herself until such time as she thought it best to throw off the mask under which alone she believed she could accomplish her purpose. She was on her way hither, intending to take this as a starting point in her investigations, and in one of the floods that have been sweeping the upper valleys I had the chance to save her life."

It was our first meeting, and I can tell you, it was a close shave for both of us. I had some ribs broken, and was otherwise pretty badly used; but I held on to her, and kept myself between her and harm, even when a sawyer gave me a rap on the head that must have gone near to cracking my skull. Fortunately we were found, and carried into Broad-Ax, or I guess we would have both died, sure enough. She was around in a day or so, but I had saved her life in the flood so I believe she saved mine in the sickness that followed. Nurses were scarce in Broad-Ax; and without her I should have died."

"That evened things up, you see; and we could start fresh. I don't know what I had been saying in the delirium that held me for some days, but it was enough to give her to understand that I was drifting along helplessly, or at least hopelessly, though life. She asked me some shrewd questions when I was strong enough to talk, and then gave me something to live for. I knew something about this Gray Mare Mine, and was willing enough to aid her, even if it was on the promise that she should work it all out in her own way."

"She has given me leave to tell you this much or, of course, I should not have spoken. I might say more, perhaps, but it is not necessary, and would weary you to no purpose. It seems that though we have what might be called a common purpose, we cannot work together. At the same time I thank you for what you have already done. You have located the man in whose search we expected to find a weary time of it, and when we discover under what name he poses here, and where are his headquarters, the end may be as far off as we had feared."

Mr. Armstrong smiled.

"You may feel him a good while before you find him, if he suspects that you and he are to be at loggerheads. It is more than likely he is connected with the road-agents of whom you have doubtless heard; and that his headquarters are in the saddle. By this time he is aware that I escaped him last night, and there will be little chance of finding him again at the place to which Miss Lord tracked him—at least, as long as I am living. Perhaps, if you shadowed me you would strike him; or his agents, who would lead him. It is worth the trying, anyhow."

"You take it very coolly. If he is as desperate a man as you say, he may drop you at any moment. I would be looking for the chance to get in the first shot if I held myself in the danger you seem to be. Better have it over and done with before he escapes us both."

"Not so easy said. It is because I know the man. He will let me know beforehand when he sends me over the range. He did it last night, though his trap was not laid for me. Had I known everything, then I would have seen who it was that walked into it—if the other man came. I guess, though, that he didn't. I have a sort of idea it was the judge the trap was laid for; and he is not the kind to be caught."

"When the time comes we will have to see what the judge is made out of; but for the present, of course, we are leaving him severely alone. You understand our platform now, and if we cannot work together we can at least go on to our ends without doing each other any harm. There is no reason why we should not give you a warning, if we see that this Conroy is laying for you; and I shouldn't wonder if we could count on the same favor from your hands. I am by no means certain that if we see the way to bring him to punishment, you will not be willing to join us."

"Yes. When Doubledeck has its courts, and such rascals get their just deserts according to

law, I will be willing to join you, or any one else, in running him down—if he lives till that time. But I rather think that he will go out of the dew long enough before that millennial day arrives. After what has been seen and said it is scarcely necessary to add, look out for the young lady who is acting as his pard in the matter of the mine. I haven't made up my mind that she is as bad as she looks, and I would like to give her a chance to draw out of bad company; but as long as she is under the influence of Conroy she will nod as he winks."

"Thanks for the warning. She may be as bad as the worst; but she is a woman. There will be no fight against her unless she gets in the way. I am glad I came to see you, though I will own that it was with some reluctance that I made up my mind to intrude. Only one question—that I should have asked sooner. Can you furnish Miss Lord any proof that the man she saw last night was the one that killed her father?"

Gentle Jack closed one eye sagely, and spoke slowly, with a far-away look:

"Yes, if the man is dead at all. You know that it is only a chance to win when you bet on a sure thing, and I have slipped up on what I was more certain of than that Stephen Lord is dead. If you can wait long enough I can send you to a man who will tell you that he saw the slaughter. He is living over in Hard-Up now. I was talking to him the other night. But then, he was just as certain that Conroy was dead; so you see you can't most always sometimes tell."

Raymond gave a start at hearing the suggestion in regard to Lord. It was the last thing that he expected from Armstrong, who had not heretofore given a hint of the possibility of such a thing.

"Heavens! If that could be possible; if Lord is still in the land of the living, what has become of him?"

"What became of Conroy? It was for his interest to vanish and he vanished. It was the merest chance that I lit on him here—or that he lit on me, which, in this case, amounts to the same thing. Men have reasons for disappearing, sometimes, that are not exactly patent to the whole world. I helped bury a man once, who was afterward hung for stealing a horse. That time, to make sure of him the boys filled him full of holes, besides; and there was some talk of taking him all apart. Oh, there are some queer things in this world, and the longer one lives the queerer they seem. However, if Miss Lord gets a chance at Conroy she had better kill him anyhow."

To this suggestion there was no response. The problem of what could have become of the supposed dead man was taking Raymond's whole attention, so that he scarcely caught the drift of the remarks. One last question he asked, however:

"Honestly, have you any reason to suppose that Stephen Lord is not dead?"

"Not a particle except what has just been evolved out of my inner consciousness and my prophetic soul. I sometimes have inspirations at other than draw poker. If you take the bet I'll lay you one to three that Stephen is not dead, and that I can produce the man in a reasonable time, of course."

Very gravely did Raymond receive the offer, in spite of the bantering tone in which it was made.

"You are not the sort of a man to make such a proposal without some chance of saving your money. I will tell Miss Lord what you have said, and though she would not think of taking your money in case you failed, it may be that she would be able to give such a reward if you succeeded, especially if the title to the Gray Mare is in his hands—or a share of it—when he is found. In fact, I can promise you that it will be worth that to you. You may not know all that it means to us."

"I have a pretty good idea. At the same time I am not a good Samaritan, not even a private detective. I don't work for wages, and if you can't bring the thing on a sporting basis, why, call the offer off and run the rig to suit yourself. After such a pointer you ought to be able to make the raffle as well as Jack Armstrong."

"Then call it a wager, and give me your hand. I speak for Miss Lord, and if she don't choose to take the book as I give it to her I will hold it myself."

He held out his hand, which Jack touched lightly, and without more than a word or two of parting Raymond vanished. A suggestion of the kind coming from any one else he might have laughed at; but he knew the reputation of Gentle Jack too well. That smiling little sport never spoke unless he meant something.

CHAPTER XXII.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

"Wid the gr'ane clover p'apein',
An' the sw'ate birds a-chirpin',
An' the silver sun a-shinin' on an airy day in May;
'Twor Oi 'twor by her walkin',
An' 'twor she that did the talkin',
As we tripped it, an' we shteppt it to the rock beside the bay."

Oh, the rock beside the bay,
Oh, the merry month av May
Whin Oi courthed Margaret Murphy on the rock beside the bay.

"Sure, an' phat's loife worruth widout the sw'ateneess av music an' whisky, to say nothin' av the jintler six? It's Barney Kain that will sing till he goes over the river; an' av all reports be true, an' there's any vartue in masses, an' prayers for his sowl, paid for years afour-hand, it's loike enough he'll be singin' afther thin. It's the nixt varse ye wad be wantin'? Howld yer whist a minnit, an' Oi'll be givin' av it, though it's not ayqual to Peggy McGlural, which takes the cake."

Of course the singer was Barney Kain; and the place was at the Daisy. When he made his appearance there was a buzz through the room. His success at the card-table, on the occasion of his previous visit, was known to every man in the house; and it was no secret that he had gone from there to Mart's, and come out of some kind of a disturbance without a scratch, giving a good deal better than they tried to send.

With a reputation like that Barney could afford to make himself at home, even if he had not met with the very cordial reception with which he was greeted as he came swaggering in alone. He was not the High Roller from Humbug, but he was quite as welcome as that dashing little sport would have been, if not more so. When he invited every man in the house up to join him at the bar, the answering movement was unanimous.

The observations having been taken, he leaned back with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and in a very sweet voice sung the first verse of a song that was new to his hearers, and sounded so well that there was a call for more.

Barney was not at all coy, but he had not disposed of his own glass.

When he had tipped off the contents, after the little oration already reported, and given a nod and a wink to his audience, he began again:

"Och, the waves wor a-splashin',
Whiole the tide came a-dashin',
An' the breakers wor a-reachin' for the sunshine on the spray;
Me arrum wor 'round about her,
Oi couldn't live widout her,
So Oi popped the quistion n'ately, on the rock beside the bay,
Oh, the rock beside the bay," etc.

"Yis. It's wan av me own, an' Oi sung it to the widdy; but bad luck to her, it didn't soften her heart a bit. 'An' it's Patrick Murphy's shoes ye'd be afther stippin' into? Away wid yel Oi'm a daycint woman, wid three wash-tubs an' a pig. D'ye think Oi'd be afther takin' up wid an omidhawn loike yersilf?' an' she druv me out wid a flatoirn. But all the same it's an illegant song, whin Oi sing it; an' Oi'll give yez the rist av it so yez may judge."

"Thin she wor soillint k'apein',
So long me heart wor br'akein',
Whin Oi saw the shmoile av glory 'round her lips begin to play;
Thin ruby lips a-poutin',
A soillint 'yis wor shoutin',
While she kissed me for her answer, on the rock beside the bay."

"'Tis years that's passed a-swarmin',
Sence that same blissid mornin',
Now her shtip has lost its thrippin', an' her hair's a-gittin' gray,
Wid half a score av childrin,
It's happiniss bewild'rin'
To be livin' in our cabin, near the rock beside the bay."

Oh, the rock beside the bay,
Oh, the merry month av May,
Whin Oi married Margaret Murphy, near the rock beside the bay.

"Yis, that's phat it moight av bin, but Margaret Murphy didn't see it in those lamps, an' sint me a-kitin'. Av she's bindin' over her wash-tubs yit it's all her own fault, an' Oi'm blissin' av her ivery day for the rayson av it. Av she had bin ez big a phool az Oi wor Oi moight hev bin kerryin' wather an' slavin' me sowl out for the pig. Inshtid, it's thravilin' Oi am, wid Misther Armstrong, an' daycintly makin' me own livin' besides. Lit's dhrink ag'in, an' drown the mimory av the fair an' false."

The crowd listened long enough to catch the drift of his speech, supposing it was to be part of the song. Then the applause began. Without the invitation the cheering would have been just as hearty, for Barney had caught on, by his own merits, and the majority of those present would have sooner heard him go on with the music. At any rate, for about the first time in the history of the house, a general invitation to the bar, given by a popular man, was slighted.

"Not this time, Mr. Kain—some other time," laughed Simon McCarthy, who had dropped in unperceived by the Irishman. "You must think Doubledeck has no soul, and if it has, that there is no music in it. After that bit of sweetness, to drink your whisky again would only be taking the taste out. It's my turn now; and I'll only allow you to boss the procession at my expense."

"An' it's the top av the avening to yez, Mis-

ther McCarthy. Oi didn't obsarve ye befoure. It's happy Oi am to mate ye, an' glad Oi will be to allow ye to have yer own way. We'll dhrink together, an' ye may pay av ye pl'aze. Oi'm thinkin' there's fun afloat, an' Oi'll be shp'akin' av it by an' by."

The greeting of the Irishman was cordial, and he gave no token that he was aware how intently McCarthy was observing him, in the endeavor to make sure that this was not only Barney, but the Irishman of the night before.

He was apparently satisfied on both points, and gave a nod at the warning, as much as to say that he understood, though he had no idea to what Kain referred.

"Reckon you ain't out to hunt up more of our card-chiefs, are you? You would hardly begin by hoisting benzine with the boys. I had half a notion to tackle you myself, all in fun, you know, just to see if you were the High Roller they have been reporting you around town today. I am afraid that you have been putting a black eye on the chance of Mr. Armstrong. The boys are all saying that if you could get away with the gang that was after you last night the average sport would not have much to do with him."

"Och! Ye want to butther me up. It's a poor hand that can't win whin he howlds the cards. It wor all in the way av innocent divar-sion, an' I moight give thim their revinge, but Oi wouldn't folly it up, sence the luck moight run out. It's ownly a bit av a look 'round town to say how the land lays. But Oi don't bel'ave Misther Armstrong will be afther takin' a hand, at all, at all. It's business he's afther; more be towkin he calls it amusement."

"I hope he will find it full of pleasure; and I don't want you to forget what I told you last night. I was in earnest then, and I mean it now. If you can keep your hands out, so much the better for both of us."

The last words were uttered in a low tone, so as not to reach the ears of the bystanders, but they did not appear to give Barney any uneasiness. He laughed for an answer, and held up his finger warningly.

"No more av that. Oi want ye to go wid me ag'in to-night, down to Mart's. Oi didn't get a taste av it whin we wor there; an' this toime Oi'll have liss wilth, an' can stay longer. There's no hurry, for the fun's hardly begun, but Oi want to say it whin the toide's up, and a risin'."

"All right. You can call on me anywhere and at any time. My life is yours to command as long as the lamp keeps burning. Things will be lively, to-night. I'll stay by you; but don't be too rash. There is no telling who you will meet there. If any of the boys you have laid out are around you can bet they will try to give back what you gave them. When you are ready tip me the office, and I'll be along in the same boat if it breaks a paddle wheel."

"Thin, av we can get out quietly, mebbe we had better be starthin' roight now. But, bedad, Oi don't want to be at the head av a big delegation. They moight think we were come to take the ranch, an' begin shootin', afoure we had a fair show."

It was a little hard to slip away unobserved, but the two did it, and took the road that led to Mart's, without attracting a following of the stamp that would have been glad to go along to see the prospective fun.

When they were well away from the Daisy the two became a little more confidential. There was a liking between them that prompted each to be of service to the other; and yet each desired to be loyal to his employer. As there was so much uncertainty about what was in the future it was not so easy to decide how far their confidences could go without damage at home; and yet, after a little, they began to talk rather plainly, and it was Barney that opened the ball.

"Sure an' Oi don't know av ye wad belave me, but it's a hape av danger yer silf same might be in av ye didn't know what wor a comin', an' Oi wouldn't be Barney Kain av Oi worn't afther tippin' ye the wink. There's to be wars an' rumors av wars over the Gray Mare Mine, an' av Oi wor you Oi wad kape an oye opin for what moight come on yez at noight. Av they joomp on yez wid both fate whin yez ain't lookin' it moight hustle yez out, an' the ither gang in."

"Thanks for the warning, and I'll give you one that may do you some good—and I don't care much if it reaches Mr. Armstrong's ears. We always do keep, not only one eye open, but half a dozen; and it will take an army to get inside of the Gray Mare, daytime or night. Gentle Jack is on the other side and all that; but he is a good little man, and I would hate to see him trying to bite off more than he could handle, and go out of the damp in a squabble like that, where he hadn't a ghost of a show, and no right on his side."

"Och, it's away off ye are. It's not Misther Armstrong at all, at all, that Oi am shp'akin' av. He wad walk up in dayloight, shoot the joodge, an' take possission av the moine widout sayin' by yer l'ave. It's anither gang; an' av ye want hilp whin they come ye kin call on us, an' we'll be 'round. Toime enough to settle wid us when they are beaten. But it's an awful bad

gang that you kin be expictin', an' don't ye furgit it."

"Thanks, Barney. If you are right then the judge and I must be away off in our calculations. But I am afraid your boss is in with that same bad gang; and when the tug of war comes he will be away up front. He's not the sort to take a back seat in anything he goes into. So far he has always had the luck of the Old Boy, but that luck may run out."

"Don't ye belave it. Av he wor joompin' the mine Oi wad be betthin' he came out the top av the hape, an' av ye don't belave me the worrse fur ye. Oi'll till ye no more—an' av Oi throyed it's not much Oi could add."

"That's enough for good fellowship; and I don't ask you to give away the secrets of the boss. Let me tell you one thing, though. The lads that you cleaned out so neatly last night are after you this. I saw them at the Daisy, though they kept in the background. If you want to try Mart's again of course I will go with you; but perhaps it would be as well to turn our steps toward some place where they didn't have the pull on the ropes, for, you see—"

And anything more that McCarthy had to say remained unspoken. There was the whirr of a rope, the spring of three men from the shadows, and the two went down.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WITCH WITH WISDOM.

OF course the visit of Martha Doam—the woman who was taken for her—did not pass unremembered. When Miss Lord found her way back to her room was not known to the *attaches* of the Home; but the next morning the man who had seen the "witch" informed her of the visit, and volunteered some information in regard to the reputation of the woman.

Miss Lord expressed some surprise, asked some questions as to where Mrs. Doam could be found, and requested that she be shown in if she called again. In addition, she intimated that the woman had possibly learned that she was there in quest of her father, and might have some information in regard to him.

After the man had left her, and there was a little time thrown in, so that her object would not be so certainly suspected, Miss Lord quietly stepped out of the hotel, and after going some little distance in an opposite direction, turned her steps toward the cabin of Martha.

There was no trouble in following the directions she had received; which was fortunate, as the road was lonely, and she met no one on the latter part of it. It happened—or was it so intended—that the entrance to the hovel was not visible from the road. Had it not been for the faint trail that Martha's feet had left, it might have been hard to find it.

There were no signs of life about the place, and for a moment Miss Lord halted, and viewed the surroundings with a desolate sort of a shiver. There was something so dreary and uncanny in the glen, and its reputation was so in keeping with its appearance, that Lillian might have retreated had it not been for an asthmatic cough which she heard from within the cabin, and the sound of a footstep near to the low door.

The woman was up and stirring—doubtless had seen her already. She was not one to show her fears, if she had any; and would not turn back if she thought that eyes were on her, to see her cowardice. She took the two or three steps that were necessary to bring her to the door, and then rapped with decision, her face losing every trace of timidity, as she listened for the answer that was for a few seconds delayed. Then a low, feminine voice called to her to enter, and without hesitation she raised the latch and swung open the door.

The witch looked the character all over. She was a little, bent, withered old woman, who held a stick that might almost be called a club, and hobbled toward her, with a sparkle in her little, beady eyes, and a strange laugh that was almost a cackle.

"Ho, ho! Who have we here? Who comes now, to ask the help of the Witch of Doubledeck? Go back, girl! It is a dangerous place for one of your beauty; and there will be little for thee but sorrow, and perhaps shame when it is all over. Why ask me more, or cross my hand with silver when I have already told thee all that fortune has in store for thee?"

"When you tell me to go back, what is it that you mean? Surely there is no special

danger lurking for me in your hovel. As one woman with another I believe that you can be trusted, and there must be something more that you have to say to me or you would not have called on me last night, at the Home."

"I call on thee! Truly, Martha Doam has called on no one since she has lived in Doubledeck. The fools are glad enough to come to her. Precious quiet they are about it, too; but for all that they love to hear from her that the future is bright, or take a warning when she tells them to beware. They give me good, bright gold—more than a wandering chit like thou art could spare—more than I would rob thee of if thou couldst throw it in my lap and never miss it. I call on thee! Never!"

There was an accent of truth in the tones of the woman as she spoke—a scorn for Lillian, and the possible coin that she might bring—that could not be mistaken. There was either some error; or else Martha was variable with the hours, and lost all memory of what had just gone before.

"If this is so," said Lillian, thoughtfully, "how does it come that the man at the Home made such a mistake? He told me that you were there during my absence; asked for me; and left word that you would come to see me again. He even explained where you lived. Unless there are two Martha Doams in Doubledeck how can this mistake have occurred? Who else is there that might be taken for you?"

"He told thee so? There would be no one to bribe him to tell thee that lie; and the men at the Home are honest, if sometimes surly; it has a strange look. Thou hast come here for a purpose—who is it that has an object to make that purpose fail? There will you find the one that sent thee here—but for what? Canst thou guess?"

"To give me such greeting as you did, I suppose. To tell me to go away from here; to give up the fight for that which is my own, and to leave others to riot in the wealth of spoils that were stolen from the orphan. If suspicion points anywhere it must be toward the man who holds the mine that should belong to the daughter of Stephen Lord—to me. If your words go for anything they tell me that."

"And that man is—speak, girl! You have said too much not to tell me all."

"He is known here as Haddington. In a year a man may have a dozen names; and no one care. What his true name is might help me—do you know it?"

Lillian looked straight in the face of the witch as she spoke, and saw that for some reason her words went home. There was a little start and then a change, almost indescribable but none the less observable, to the girl. It seemed to her that the woman had suddenly thrown herself on guard at the first mention of the name of Haddington. It was done after the manner of one who was accustomed to self-control, and was on guard at the first note. If she was a witch she could be a great deal more coherent than the race generally has credit for being. At the last question she was silent for a moment, and then, looking up thoughtfully, answered:

"Perhaps better than I know thine. Who is it that you profess to be? If names go for anything thou must have one; and most likely it is a good one that thou claimest. Speak it first, and then one may know if it be wise to give other answer."

"So this is your boasted witchcraft—asking the name of your visitor and learning beforehand what it is that she wishes to know? Next there will be some vague prophecy and a claim for the gold that I give only when it has been earned. I begin to think that you are in the employ of the man who can only be my foe; and that perhaps the man at the Home was not so far wrong when he said that you were seeking me last night. Your words and actions go to show that you are anxious to know more about my affairs than you care to reveal. Last night you knew my name fast enough; strange that you should care to hear me repeat it to-day. But it is a good one, that I am not ashamed of; the name of a woman who will one day get her rights in spite of you all. Judge Haddington knows it, if he does not know me. I am Lillian Lord, the only child of that Stephen Lord who located

the Gray Mare Mine, and I claim at least one-half of it, and the wealth that has come from it. Do you feel any the easier now that you have heard me openly make the claim that I was willing to quietly advance if even the shadow of justice was to be accorded me?"

"Lillian Lord! The daughter of the Stephen Lord who located the Gray Mare Mine!"

Steadily Martha repeated the words, looking the young woman sharply in the face, ready to detect the slightest tremor under her searching glances.

"Yes, Lillian Lord; come to get justice, or lose her life in the attempt. What have you to say to me now; either for yourself or for the man who employed you to meet me with the warning you tried to utter when I entered?"

"What have I to say to thee? Naught but that thou art a vile impostor. In life Stephen Lord had trials and troubles enough; in death even a woman would be willing to steal his name and his blood to gather in a little of the wealth which should have been his, but which he could not live to enjoy! Go back, girl! None knoweth better than Martha Doam that thy claim is a fraud, and that thou art something worse. If thou hast come here to learn of me what is in store for thee in the future, take this as thy answer: The wealth that should have been Stephen Lord's will never be thine; and it is at peril of thy life and honor for thee to seek it. There will be those watching who hate the name to the death, and who would even slay thee if they but suspected that thou wert his daughter; why then shouldst thou draw upon thee their hatred for naught? Thou hast tried to be a knave; seek not to go further, and play the fool, to thine own hurt."

"And this was the threat and the warning you came to give me last night. Glad I am that I sought you this morning, since I now know what I may expect. It is fight to the death, and with the threat of something even worse behind. Thank you. Go, tell your employer that threat or force are alike wasted on me. I am not alone in the world; and the fight will be more even than he supposes—beware that you are not crushed in it."

"Fool! No threat has been wasted on thee. The truth will do as well; and a very little of it will suffice to crush thee. A word or two from me would send thee out of the way forever. It is enough that I know that you are an impudent impostor—and that in a word I can prove it. Now, go. After that warning, work the worst; and see how soon thy wicked plot will be bare. Go! I know the daughter of Stephen Lord when I see her, and you are not she."

As the woman went on speaking she looked more than ever like a witch. Her form straightened, to be sure; but her eyes sparkled until they seemed to send forth streams of light; her features twisted themselves until they looked like the very essence of wrath; her arms were upraised, and in place of the cool, reflective manner in which she had received the statements of the girl, there was an abandonment of passion as strange as it was terrible. Before such a change Lillian fell back, even if her heart did not altogether quail. Slowly, and without a word she backed her way out of the cabin, Martha Doam following until she had fairly crossed the threshold. Then Martha slammed the door shut with a vindictive crash, that revealed her feelings as plainly as words would have done; and all was silent within and without.

After all, there had been some satisfaction for Lillian in the interview. She had not a doubt that this woman was in the pay of the present holder of the Gray Mare Mine, and that she had made the visit the previous evening to frighten her from the course upon which she was determined to enter. She knew what she had to expect. There was a thinly-veiled threat of force and foul play, and beyond that an assertion that she was an impostor. If the latter could not be proved then she must look out for the former. She turned away from the door, intending to retrace her steps to Doubledeck. In turning she found that she was face to face with a man, who had doubtless heard every word of that fierce outbreak on the part of Martha Doam.

And that man was Elmer Conroy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ELMER CONROY APPEARS TO HAVE A SHOCK.

WHAT little the girl knew of the man facing her would hardly have led her to believe that he could be so deeply affected by the words of the witch as his present appearance seemed to indicate. He looked as one might look who had seen a ghost, and heard a message from the other world.

"In Heaven's name," he muttered, seizing the girl by the wrist and drawing her away at a rapid gait, that would soon bring them out of the dingle. "What are you doing here, and who is that woman? What was it that she was saying to you? and how did it come that she saw you at all? It is more of the cursed folly of all womankind. Trust them out of your sight a moment and they will knock the biggest scheme on record, west end crooked."

"I do not understand you. We have no scheme; and the truth cannot be harmed by the insane ravings of an old woman, even if she passes for a witch. Her reputation will hardly make her testimony any the more credible in a court of justice."

"Who is talking about a court of justice? The less one has to do with such things out here the better. They are generally presided over by Judge Lynch; and in the exceptions you will always find his cousin pulling the strings, if he is not on the bench. What I wanted to know was, how you came to find that woman, and what you were saying to her, anyhow? Have you lost your wits, or don't you know how to answer a straight question? If you don't it is time that you were learning, before there is a heap of trouble brewed for all hands concerned."

There was a change going on, both in the girl's manner and tone. She had met him defiantly; now, she was his very obedient servant. She had ignored his real questions; now, she answered them, though in a careless, tripping sort of way that was at total variance with the sober earnestness she showed when not in his presence.

"It is not much of a story I have to tell, though I begin to think that it may have a good deal of meaning. That old woman came to the hotel last night—though now she denies it. It was after I had gone out to search for you, when I found that you did not come, as I had expected. She inquired for me; and learning that I was out, said that she would call again. They told me of it at the Home this morning, and I had a fancy that she might have some information that would be of service. If so, it would be just as well that attention should not be drawn her way, by her coming again; at least, until I knew what it was. If she was a witness of any account, she might be spirited away. I came out here, and had a talk with her. From what you heard—even if you were only in at the death—you can guess the rest."

With a change in the woman came a change in the man. He was no longer boisterous and overbearing. Perhaps he had, by this time, recovered from a shock.

"I know that you have given your whole hand away, after the merest school-girl fashion; but you have not told me who the woman really is. Strange that I should know nothing of her; never should have seen her here before; and you, the second day in the place, should have unearthed her. You have acted foolishly; but it may all be for the best. We will try our best to have it so."

"I know nothing about the woman save what I have seen; and the indefinite statements of the man at the Home. She has the reputation of being a witch, and of making such sort of a living as she makes at all by fortune-telling, prophecies in regard to mining prospects, and the like. She let out enough to show that she was all for the other side; and if she is to be believed, the judge will fight us by foul means as well as fair."

"And the name by which you heard her spoken of—what did you say that it was?"

"Martha Doam. It seems well known in the town; it is strange that you have never heard it mentioned, even if you have not seen her."

"Martha Doam! Ah, I remember. It is always the way. When one is willing to pass a thing by as of no importance, it turns out to be the keystone of the whole arch.

No one told you how long she has been here, I suppose; and where she came from?"

"No one. I have told you positively everything I know of her, except what I learned from her conversation. What you must have heard of it covered the whole substance of that. She pretended to know a good deal about the Gray Mare, and its owners; but I doubt not she was set on me by Haddington to frighten me off. She says she can prove that my claim is a fraudulent one. That shows the line they will take; and if they rely on that we will have them on the hip before they know how the case is going. The proofs are all ready, and they cannot be gainsaid. If any story of hers is their reliance, it will be easy enough to bring them to grief."

They had moved away while this conversation was going on, and now were out of sight of the cabin. Conroy had loosened his hold on the wrist of the girl, and was striding along by her side with eyes cast down, and thinking deeply. When he spoke again it was with the air of one who has made up his mind.

"There is more in this than you dream of, and more than it is necessary that you should know. Be careful that you say nothing of this visit, and let no one hear you mention the name of this Martha Doam. If anything should happen to her it would be as well it should not be suspected it was to your interest that she was taken off. Some day you will perhaps understand me better; for the present all I need say is that she may not be as mad as she looks—if she is the woman I believe she is. Lucky that I followed you here. There might have been damage enough done; but I think I can remedy what has happened, if not render it actually the best thing that could have occurred. Whether we knew it or not, the woman was here all the same; and it would have been a bad thing to have been taken unawares."

"More mystery. Well, have it your own way. You know better than I how to fight the battle, and I am in your hands. When one is dealing with wolves I suppose it is best to snap and snarl with the rest of them."

"Very sensible, and I hope you will remember it. Now and then one does hear wisdom from a woman. By the way, our friend of last evening is on the carpet again, bright and smiling as ever. He too has a hand—or wants to have—in the Gray Mare. At present I suppose that he is reaching solely on his own account; but the moment that he drops to the state of affairs you may be sure that he will be fighting tooth and nail on the other side. Where the spoils are, such men are gathered together, and it would have been best to have made a certainty of matters last night. The rascals who took charge of him played me false, and he found some means to shake off the drug. He had been around the town before that, under the disguise of that Irish servant of his, and worked it to his heart's content, as he usually does. He gave his secret away to the judge's right hand man when he left him for the night, so it is not hard to see where he expects his interests to lie. The fellow that heard it only told me this morning or I would not have been taken so aback when I found that the wrong fish had floundered into our net. It will be all the easier to take him off when he next makes his appearance in that garb. When my fingers drop on him again he can begin to say his prayers. There will be no more escapes."

"Don't reckon without him. It may not be so easy to find him again off of his guard, and you say yourself that he is a bad man to fight. I cannot afford to lose you just now. Be cautious. If anything were to happen to you it would leave me alone. Your ways are not my ways, but I could not do without you. Was it this that you were following me to tell?"

"Partly; but more to tell you that the time for action is almost at hand. Were it not that I do not care to move while this same Mr. Armstrong is at large, it might be to-night. It will not be put off many days. Haddington has kept silent when he was offered a chance to speak, now let him look to himself. We will strike him where he is most vulnerable. If he goes under it is his own fault. Once in possession, and a straight story will be sufficient to bring us all the backing that we may want. But I must settle Mr. Armstrong

first; and meantime you had better not waste your time in such foolishness as this. Doubledeck is the place you want to work. Hunt up the men who knew Stephen Lord, if there are any such; and at any rate make your inquiries for them, and let something of your story be known. You can get half the town on your side before the trouble begins. If you need money you can have it by the bushel; but if you are wise you will not try to throw any of it away on Martha Doam.

"It is not likely that I will trouble her again, if she will let me alone. I wish that I could see your little army. I would like to have an idea of what sort of fellows we must depend on when we move on the works of the enemy."

"Time enough for that. To-morrow night you can see my fellows—and lead them, too, if you want to. I will vouch for it that you will find them following you to the death."

"Let it be as it is. Anything will suit me so that there is no failure."

Their conversation had brought them almost to the town, and Conroy halted. While Mr. Armstrong was running at large, the man who once called himself Elmer Conroy did not care to be seen upon its streets by daylight. Lillian went on her way alone, while the man watched her pace down the road, a wicked smile on his lips.

CHAPTER XXV.

GENTLE JACK SAVES THE WRONG MAN.

As the judge held his peace in regard both to what he suspected and what he knew, and Mr. Armstrong made no declaration of intentions, the quiescence of the little sport was something of a puzzle to Doubledeck. It was even suggested by some that the racket with the judge, on the way down, had so far thrown him off his base that he was in that condition known as "under cow."

The ideas of the people who did not know him were nothing to Jack; and he was pretty sure that those who did would conclude that he knew what he was about. Since meeting with Elmer Conroy, and learning something of the scheme that was on foot, he was satisfied to wait until the time arrived when his share in what was coming should be more fully developed. He called on the judge; had a little talk with Tom Raymond; and then saw no good in further movement until Conroy showed his hand, which he was sure would be done before long. When Barney went out on the war-path, it was with the full consent of his master, who subjoined a caution to take care of himself, as he seemed to have done his part toward raising up what might be a crop of very bad enemies. For the balance of the evening Armstrong lounged around the Home, waiting for the intelligence that Barney would probably have for him when he returned. He made a few acquaintances, and passed the time quietly.

After awhile he went to Kain's room, and threw himself on the bed. He thought he might as well improve the time a little, as he had not succeeded in getting a superabundance of sleep the previous night, in spite of his good intentions. When the Irishman came in he could wake up ready for business.

It was not hard to get into a nap this time, and there was no interruption until he woke up of his own accord, and found by his watch that it was past midnight. The house was very quiet, and there were no signs of Barney's return.

"Time he was getting it," thought Armstrong to himself, as he rolled over on the bed, looked around the dimly-lighted room, and listened for any sound of moving footsteps.

"He promised to be in early. Wonder if he hasn't got into some little bit of a difficulty. He's the boy for a bit of a ruction, and some day, or night, his luck in getting out with a whole head may play. Wonder if it would be worth while to look around a little, and see if things are straight or checkered. If the judge is taken in by what he told McCarthy last night he might—well, I have known men in his place that were none too good to send in a gang from the mine to lay out a character they thought might as well have a rest up. I believe I will go and see. I would sooner they would try that game on me than on Barney. He's a decent lad; and

if I lost him I don't know where I would get another as good."

So, after all, Mr. Armstrong began to explore Doubledeck—having first made some inquiry at the office in regard to his man.

Having been around the town some little by daylight there was little danger that he would go wrong after dark. With the Daisy Saloon as his point of destination he had no trouble in striking a straight course; and he arrived there without adventure, to find that the ceremonies were at their most interesting stage. The tables were full, and business at the bar lively.

His entrance was comparatively unnoticed, and he quietly made his inquiries at the bar, over the glass that he ordered.

He learned that Barney had been there early in the evening, in the best of humors, and that he and Simon McCarthy, the manager of the Gray Mare, had gone away together, intending to visit the dance-house known as Mart's. Since then nothing had been heard of them. Probably they were there yet, enjoying themselves.

"I can't say that I trust Mr. McCarthy any too much," thought Jack, as he strolled out of the saloon, and turned toward Mart's. "He will jump as the judge whistles, of course; and just now the judge would be willing enough to see me out of the way. He evidently don't like men that ask questions; and I have got into the way of doing that when I'm on business. Mart's it is; and we will see if there is any sign of them there. I wouldn't wonder if I would find him the center of a ruction. There seems to have been nothing serious, so far, or we would have heard something about it at the Daisy."

The distance to the dance-house was passed over at a rapid rate; and not at all to his surprise, as he neared the place, Armstrong heard the familiar sounds that betokened a row inside.

Without hesitation he quickened his steps, till he struck a quick run. The building was not far away, and he could see the lights that streamed through the front windows, and hear the savage voices that swelled out through the open doors, around which a crowd clustered, like bees at the entrance to a hive.

"That must be Barney at work," he thought, "for I hear the furniture breaking. It's high time I put the breaks on or he will be trying to clean out the town. Here goes!"

And through the crowd he carelessly pushed his way, elbowing to the right and to the left, until he stood inside, looking around in search of his man.

He could see nothing of him; and as for hearing, there was such a Babel of sounds that he could not have distinguished a fog horn from a calliope, let alone the voice of Barney Kain, with a hundred others to drown it.

However, there was a nucleus to the writhing mass of humanity on the floor, and, as there was no one on the outskirts flourishing a stick, Mr. Armstrong suspected that Barney was somewhere near the bottom of the pile, and lurched forward accordingly.

As an expert Jack was not long in doubt as to the way things were going. In the first place, there was a circle of men lying around on the floor, some of them senseless where they had been dropped, and others just beginning to crawl to their feet. Around and within this circle was a ring of spectators, who seemed only too willing to take a hand in, the moment they got a chance. Then there was the hub of the whole affair; and a very solid one it appeared. How many men were in it was not so easy to guess, but there seemed to be a host. So closely were they packed together that no one was thinking of striking a blow or using a weapon, but all were busy adding their weight to the mass that was holding, or trying to hold, some living thing at the center. There was only one man there, but he was a terror.

Of course, with such a crowd so closely packed, there was not much chance to use weapons, and not much apparent need for doing so. Weight would tell, sooner or later; and the chances were that they had smothered the man already.

There was no time and little opportunity to ask questions. As a stranger Mr. Arm-

strong would not be apt to get much satisfaction in the midst of such excitement, and, meantime, the man underneath would be apt to breathe his last gasp. It was about as safe to explore and see for himself, and very vigorously did Gentle Jack go to work. He caught the nearest man by the collar, and with a wrench and a heave tossed him clean out of the ring. That left a little opening, and the man on either side of it was dragged out and dropped, while Armstrong, seeing a head that looked as though it belonged to a body well under the pile, got another collar hold and gave another heave.

It brought the man—and it brought something else. Just as Jack stepped back to kick the knife out of the hand of the man he had jerked from the mix, the heap scattered as though from an internal explosion, and the living core sprang lightly out from the debris.

To Mr. Armstrong's surprise and disgust the man was Elmer Conroy!

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISFORTUNE MAKES STRANGE BED-FELLOWS.

WHAT a man like Elmer Conroy, who was generally careful to have all the odds on his side, could be doing in such a riot, might have been an interesting study at a more convenient season; but just now Mr. Armstrong had no time to devote to the subject, after the brief breathing-spell granted while every one else was rising from the floor. Then the rush began again, and as he was recognized as the one who had interfered when the crowd had such a solid thing on Conroy, the wrath of the men he had so roughly handled came his way—to say nothing of the fact that Conroy, by some chance, had sprung directly to his side.

"It's no use," thought Jack. "We're alone against the house, and may as well pull together. Some of these fellows with knives would have me dead before I had a chance to explain; and as long as we have to hit at the same men, there is no use to hit each other. But if any one had told me when I started out that I would be doing a good turn to that hound before I got back, I would have been willing to put up all my odd change on proving that he was away off. Here they are, and down goes some one's meeting-house!"

And as Jack thought, he hit out from the shoulder.

The man who was driving at him with a knife was a Mexican, and had no more idea of the noble art of pugilism than a stick. The blow caught him on the bridge of the nose, and sent him spinning back over the floor, on which he would have stretched his length if he had not landed against a couple of his compatriots, who were dashing in to his assistance. The three staggered away together, while Jack took a survey of the field, and a glance at the man whom he had so unwittingly aided.

If he sent three men staggering back there were plenty more coming on; and Conroy, in spite of the strong signs of life that he had just given, did not look as though there could be much fighting strength left in him. His clothing was torn and gashed in many places, and the blood was flowing quite freely from almost as many wounds. Evidently, he had been having a hard tussle.

It was a little of a surprise that he had not begun to use fire-arms, but the reason of that was revealed as Jack's eyes fell on a belt of weapons that had been kicked to one side in the struggle. The belt had been cut through with a keen knife, and had dropped out of reach before Conroy had thought of it.

"Reckon they don't play any such game on me," muttered Armstrong, as he threw his hands up to a position of guard.

"It may be as well not to begin to pull trigger until I find it can't be helped; but when I want the tools I guess they will be where I keep them. I didn't think Conroy was the kind of a man to lose his weapons. Must be going down hill, or he would not be so careless. But he has been making no slouch of a fight, and I don't want to see this sort of a gang take him in. He has got to be my meat, or I will know the reason why. Here's at you!"

And with the exclamation he was hitting out more vigorously than ever.

The two were now side by side, and though it hardly seemed possible that they could long sustain such a determined rush, it was

with a bold front they met it. They had worked their way back so well that the wall protected them in the rear, and they were reasonably safe from surprise in that direction; but the movement had its disadvantage. Since there was no one behind them, to suffer if any shots went astray, it would not be long, probably, before the crowd would take to firearms. However wild men may be with rage, they are not anxious to serve as chopping-blocks when there is a way to vengeance in their hands.

With the two Americans it was hit, hit, hit, for a time; and then the crisis was at hand. Conroy overreached himself in a straight blow that he had delivered, and before he could recover himself, three or four men were inside of his guard.

"Curse you, why don't you shoot the lights out?" he gritted at Jack, in a low, hard tone, as he wound himself around the men, crushing them together so they could not, for the moment, strike.

"It's about that time," laughed the little sport, amused, in spite of himself, at the corner in which he saw his foe; and, springing sideways, he gave a look toward the door, taking in the crowd that was in the way of a retreat while his pistol was crackling.

The noise of the first pistol-shots that had been fired during the fray had a startling effect, and the darkness that followed was still more surprising. All the lamps were not extinguished; but the most of them went out, and the light of the one or two left did not reach the spot where the two men were at bay.

"Done, like a little man; now follow me. You chipped in and helped me out of a hole, and I won't throw off on you now. This way. I know the ways of the place and can get you out of harm's way fast enough."

Jack yielded to the touch on his shoulder, and was following before Conroy had come to the end of his brief speech. In the shadow and smoke that was almost as good as perfect darkness, they moved away together, and before their retreat was suspected, had made their way along the wall to the neighborhood of the bar.

Here there was a little door, set so carefully in the wall that it was seldom, if ever, noticed. Through this Conroy led the way, closing it carefully behind him. They were in a small room, occupied by the bartenders when the slackening of trade gave them an opportunity to try for a little rest. From this the way was open to the street, and the two lost no time in taking it.

"I suppose they will wall this up," growled Conroy, as they passed out.

"On the strength of your man's performances last night, they have put boards up to the windows; and I notice they were mighty careful not to interfere with the lights. They knew that if it were once dark there, I would get away with them. I owe you one, at last; though I guess you did not know who it was you were serving when you took hold of the rope. You did a big thing for me, though it may not pan out so well for you in the end. If I were in your place I am not sure that I would want to roam around Doubledeck very much. I suppose you are ready to go home now, though if you wait a moment I can show you something to make your sleep sweet. Those shots of yours were as good as a signal, and my boys are coming to wreck the place."

"And what will your boys propose to do to me?" asked Mr. Armstrong, who had listened quite coolly to all this.

"From what you have been saying I judge they have their orders, and if they are like their boss they won't hesitate much about carrying them out."

"Oh, come now! Don't make me worse than I am. After having just done me such a good turn you deserve a few hours' grace, and a fair start. You have had several shies at me in your time, and I really never got down to business with you. I did hate to hurt a boy. If you had stayed away I can assure you that I would never have taken the trouble to hunt you up. Bear that in mind, will you. You are meddling in my affairs, and must go under when you are once really in the way; but it is your own fault. Get out of this and you will save both money and life. It is truth from the ground up that I am talking."

"If you would tell me a little about my Irishman I would thank you a great deal more. If I hadn't thought he was somewhere near the middle of that pile, you can rest assured that I never would have meddled with it. He started for the place some hours ago; and I was fool enough to chip in without ever asking whether he got there."

"Oh, Barney is all right! If he hadn't been trying to play it fine, he wouldn't have got into trouble. So far, his worst offense is having been found in bad company. He will be around in a day or so, as lively as a cricket. If he don't come back on time, you had better ask the judge what has become of him—if you are in condition to ask anything."

The insinuation of Conroy agreed only too well with the suspicions of the little sport. He was not at all sure that any personal injury was intended; but that McCarthy should again seek his company, seemed to argue that there was some reason connected with it, more than belonged simply to good fellowship. Most likely they wanted to pump the man in regard to the plans of the master. They might pump a good while before they got anything out of Barney. And for these reasons it was rather a relief to think that he had not fallen into the clutches of the gamblers whom he had cleaned out at the card-table, and the lambs at Mart's, who seemed to train under them.

As there was something like an armed truce between Conroy and the sport, the latter would perhaps have asked some further questions in regard to the matter, had it not been that he could now hear the sound of hasty but guarded footsteps, nearing the spot, where, at some little distance from the saloon, they had halted.

"Now then, I guess it is time that you were moving. There are some gentlemen coming, as I have hinted already, who will get down to business in another minute. If you want to see the fun you can be turning back with me; and if you don't, you had better be going somewhere in search of an alibi."

"Thanks for the invitation. Don't know but what I may as well go back and try a hand on the other side. It's a poor game that won't work both ways, you know. And if you are clean gone crazy, the sooner you and I come to a settlement, the better the chance I will have to collect my little bill. If you wrinkle yourself up in a general clean-out at Mart's, there won't be much room left for you in Doubledeck to become a mine-owner or a millionaire."

"If it was not that I don't feel like slaughtering a man who has just saved my life I would accept what I suppose you intend as a challenge, fast enough. But I would sooner let the thing go till the next time. I could hold a great deal straighter. As to your hint—I hope I know how to run my affairs, and if you could only be living when every thing is settled you would be satisfied that I don't run many risks, or make many mistakes. The boys will be waiting for me; you can go or stay. In any either case I will bid you good-night. It may be that we will not have the opportunity to say it again."

"Good-night, then. Between you and me there need not be much ceremony, but if it makes you feel any the better we can take our leave in form. Maybe we had better shake hands. After your little effort of last night you can't think how friendly I feel, anyhow."

"Well, scarcely. The less we say about that the better—and here we go."

Conroy glided off at that, leaving Mr. Armstrong uncertain what would be his best course. The invitation to see the thing out was altogether too cordial not to mean something; and he wondered what sort of a trick was on hand. Though he could give the man credit for having at least a spark of gratitude in his composition, he was sure that in the end the hatred that was in him would crop out, so he hardly cared to trust himself too deeply in his power, even for that evening. A medium course was perhaps the best.

Accordingly, the sport strolled back toward Mart's; but he did not intend to go in until he could get a better understanding of what was afloat. The lamps were all in place again—or their substitutes were—and

the crowd was ramping aimlessly about the room, when Elmer Conroy made his reappearance.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE CONCLUSION.

ALTHOUGH the external marks of the struggle he had been engaged in were not removed, and he was ragged and bleeding, Conroy came through the door like a new man, and stepped as jauntily as though his coat was not in tatters, and he was not bleeding from half a dozen wounds.

He halted when he had come to where every one could have a good view of him, and looked around to make sure that his presence was noted before he spoke.

"Gentlemen!" he began: "I was in here a few moments ago, and some of you took an unfair advantage. If there had not been one white man, with plenty of sand, in the room, you would have rubbed me out after a dozen had downed me when I warn't looking. I am looking now, and am ready to try it over again. Who opens the ball?"

A howl of delight greeted the announcement; and all spoke at once.

"The man who killed Miguel! The murderer! Down with him!"

And then there was a rush.

Of course there was a cause for all this hatred, and though the scene that produced it might be well worth describing, it will be sufficient to briefly say that a short time previous to Mr. Armstrong's arrival Elmer Conroy had been playing a game of cards with one of the frequenters of the house, a Mexican, who was well known there, and who had started the fracas with Barney, the previous evening. The two were by themselves, in an obscure corner, and if they had been watched it might have been seen that they were talking a great deal, to be deeply interested in their game. The first thing that drew attention toward them was a cry that sounded through the house. No one noticed what had gone before, but Conroy was standing over the prostrate form of the Mexican, a reddened knife in his hand. He made a movement as though he would throw himself down on the body, for another stroke, when Miguel writhed away, and at the same time there was a rush of his friends, who had heard his cry, after that, Conroy had enough to do to take care of himself. He made a hard fight of it, but numbers told, and had it not been for the opportune arrival of Mr. Armstrong the crowd would have finished him in another moment.

That chance was over now, and the man was ready for this second rush. When the lights went out, just previous to his retreat, he had repossessed himself of his belt of arms, and now, at the savage cry, he threw up his hands, each one claspings the butt of a revolver.

"Go slow, gentlemen! I asked for one man to open the ball, but said nothing about an army. If you come in that shape my friends will have to begin to talk, and down will go some of your buildings, double quick. Speak up! Is it to be fair play, or foul?"

As he spoke Conroy backed away a trifle, and it seemed as though the sight of the weapons in his hands had the effect of checking the charge a little.

One man was not able to cow a mob like this, even if that man was Elmer Conroy. Again the chorus of cries for vengeance went up.

Conroy waited no longer. The humor of the mob was evident; and first, with one weapon, and then with the other, he fired into the moving mass. The two shots came so quickly, one after the other that the sounds almost blended; then came a third report, from the other side, just as a gang of men burst into the room, revolvers in hand.

"They come a trifle late," sighed Armstrong, who saw it all through the window that he had preempted as his post of observation. "By heavens, he is down!"

Sure enough, at that answering shot Conroy threw up his hands, and pitched heavily to the floor, at the very feet of his friends, as they came swarming in to the rescue.

One of them was down by the side of the prostrate man before he had fairly touched the floor, and was feeling of his heart, while the rest halted the moment they had placed

themselves between their leader and the crowd.

"Hold hard, there!" exclaimed the first man at Conroy's side. "I reckon the fun is all over before it fairly begun. He has it bad, and right where he lived. It's no use to carry this thing any further, unless these infernal Greasers insist on our getting even. The best thing we can do is to carry him off, and call it quits. I swear! I believe he is over the range already. Some one show me who fired that shot."

The man raised from his knees, and glared around on the gang that was halted, wondering at the unexpected speed with which the work had been done.

No one answered. It did not look as though the man would have a very comfortable time if he was known. Who these strangers were was a matter of guesswork alone. The man on the floor, even, had not been recognized by any of the mob that had been so savagely trying to down him; and those who had come to his assistance were equally unknown; but that they were desperate men was easily understood. Mart himself came forward.

"I haven't had part or lot in all this riot, and if I had a say-so in it no one would have been hurt; but I must say that the man got no more than he deserved. If he had even got all of that he would have gone out of the wet at the end of a rope. He killed Miguel in cold blood. But when a man is dead that settles it. You can take his corpse away, and we won't charge you a cent; though if somebody else don't foot the bill I will have a pretty penny to pay by the time I get my lamps all in running order again. Get him out of here, before there is any more trouble, and I will see that no one molests you as you go."

Very cool was Mart as he spoke, and he kept his eyes sharply fixed on the man that he considered the leader of the opposition forces, while his hands were in his pockets after his habit when he was dealing with bad men at more than arm's length.

It looked as though the answer would be savage if not deadly. A low growl ran through the crowd, and every man looked at the leader for orders. If he had said the word there would have been blood on the floor, red and plenty.

But the answer that Mart really received was more pacific than he expected.

"All right. We are going now, and you can pass around the hat and raise a purse to pay for your blamed old lamps. If we ever drop this way again look out that we don't smash lamps, shebang and proprietor, too. If it wasn't for getting the body of the captain out of harm's way you bet we would be doing it now. So-long, till we see you later. If you ain't satisfied with yer work, you men of Doubledeck, you kin try ter interfere as we go along. We kin tell, then, just who to fit for a funeral; and it won't take a coroner's inquest to say that they are dead, either."

Then, without paying any further attention to the crowd, which he had really bluffed after a fashion that Doubledeck could hardly believe when it thought the matter all over, the speaker made a motion to several of the men at his side. They picked up the body between them and carried it out and away.

"Really," thought Mr. Armstrong, who had been a spectator and a hearer, but whose blood remained entirely cool, "if I hadn't known the man to come to life once before I should believe that the game was over, the lights out, and the crowd gone home. I guess that was just the way he worked it the other time; and he is a fool to try the same trick twice. He must be all ready to begin the attack on the Gray Mare, and I shouldn't wonder if he had some sort of a private arrangement in soak for me, my own individual self. I think I shall provide for it; and if I can find Barney the idea strikes me that I know how."

It was not prudent for Armstrong to make a personal application to Mart, for information, just then; and he withdrew from the vicinity no wiser than he came, unless the suggestion of Conroy went for something. If he hunted for Barney all night it was doubtful if he could catch up with him, until he was ready to be found; and the best thing to do was to go back to the Home, and

wait for information. If anything had happened to Kain through McCarthy or the judge, he mentally vowed he would have a heavy reckoning before his business in Doubledeck was all settled.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HEBE HAYWOOD IS STAGGERED.

GENTLE JACK was building a great deal better than he knew when he told Tom Raymond that it was more than likely Stephen Lord was still living. The words were said on the spur of the moment, and without any stronger grounds to go on than those he had frankly owned were rather slender, according to the average way of looking at things.

But Tom Raymond had seen enough of the sport to convince him that he was a man of the winning kind when he took a hand in any game. He went away full of what he considered his information, and hardly able to wait until he could see Hebe, to tell her of the important result of the interview. As some hours had to elapse before he could manage it, without going exactly contrary to the instructions she had given him when they parted, he had time before him to digest what he had heard, and lay out notes for future reference.

And even if Lord was dead, as they had all along supposed, here was the information that he had been murdered by this Conroy, who was now the real head and front of a scheme to personate the heirs of the dead Stephen Lord, and gain possession of his effects. What view of matters Hebe would take, remained to be seen; but as she had already expressed enough confidence in the little sport to cause him to writhe with jealousy, Raymond had an idea that she would take his word as far as he had gone, until there was something to show that there was a mistake about what he had said. The only trouble now was to find Conroy.

He had already made some inquiry in a guarded way in regard to the man, and found that nothing was known of him by those who would be apt to have information if there was any to be got. And he had never seen the man in Doubledeck—or anywhere else, as far as he could tell from the little information he had to go on. The suggestion that he should shadow Armstrong was about as sapient counsel as he could expect to receive, and he decided to carry it out if nothing better offered.

For a wonder he did not see that it might be just as well to follow the other claimant. Probably Armstrong thought of that; but preferred to keep Miss Lillian for his own observation.

He knew that Hebe was out on a search of some kind, and that she had thought it best to warn him not to attempt to follow her; and yet, at the risk of offending her, he would not have hesitated to hunt for her if he had only known which way to turn. He was more than delighted when, later on, chance seemed to aid him, and he caught sight of her, wearily plodding along the street, as though she had returned from a lengthy excursion. The fact that she was in disguise did not make any difference. He thought he would have known her at the distance of a mile.

He did not care to offend her; but he decided that he must make an effort to speak with her at most any cost. He sauntered toward her, and when he had come almost in front of her she looked up and saw him for the first time, as his lips fashioned, little louder than a whisper:

"I must see you at once. I have heard strange things that are of vital importance. Where will you listen to me?"

She looked up at him listlessly.

"What is it that is so important that it cannot wait? I have heard all there was in the world for me to hear. Better leave me. There may be greater danger than you think for in meeting me again. I begin to think it were better to forget everything here, and go away."

"Where have you been? Who have you seen?" asked Tom, in his anxiety over her unexpected depression almost forgetting the news he had been so full of a moment before.

"You look as though you had been having some terrible experience. I feared that you would run some risk when I parted from you last, and nothing but your positive

orders kept me away from your side. Confide in me. What is it?"

"Do not speak to me now—meet me in an hour, when I shall have had a little time to control my feelings. I have learned more than I went to hear, and I do not yet know how it will affect my life. I must reason it all out before I can see you again."

He would have urged her to more confidences, even though the time and place were so much against it, had she given him opportunity. It was only when she looked at him almost fiercely, and hissed rather than said:

"I have told you all that I have to tell you at present, and you insist on more, or follow me, at your peril."

He gave it up, after that, and allowed her to go on her way. For the next hour he was a very uncomfortable man.

And yet, when they did meet again he could hardly credit the evidences of his senses. The face that had looked almost woe-begone was now as fresh as ever, and she held out her hand as frankly as though she had not turned from him a little before with a scowl of hate, or something quite like to it.

"Pardon me if I treated you with something worse than rudeness, a little bit ago. I had been after information, and I found it by the car-load lot. It was because I could not believe that which I had hoped would be of value, that I felt as though the whole world had crumbled beneath my feet. I am over that now, since I have found the way to reconcile what I have heard with what I know; and I am even anxious to hear the balance of the revelation. I have a promise of it for the next interview, which is to take place to-morrow, if nothing happens to prevent. Now, what is it that you have learned which is of so great importance? You would hardly listen when I told you to wait; but indeed, I was tired and wretched, and could not have understood, even if I heard, anything of importance, just then."

"Do not mention it, though I have had a miserably impatient wait. I will not ask you anything in regard to what you heard, and will tell you my own story at once. I have an idea that after hearing it you will forget everything else. There may be work for you to do that you have not counted on. And of course, you may rely on my aid all the time, as far as you may be willing to accept it. You have shown, at times, that you thought I was learning very little about those things you wished to know. Perhaps this time you may think I have learned too much—for truth."

"Go on."

He stopped to consider which he should mention first. The two points were so directly contrary that it was a question how they should be used. As he saw that she was waiting for him to speak, and looked as though she was ready to hear almost anything, he began at haphazard:

"You wanted me to visit that young man whom you met last night, and I have done so. In spite of his profession I believe he is a man that a woman could trust. At first he had very little that was definite to say, though he told me frankly that he had his interests on the other side. Afterward he grew more confidential. If you once proved to him the justice of your claim, I have no doubt he would say that the Gray Mare, or a share of it, was yours, and would do his best to put you in possession. He advised that you waste no time in proving who you were, and endeavoring to get a settlement before the judge had transferred his interests, or a large portion of them, to the stockholders who are thinking of taking the mine. I told him that I agreed with him, but that you had other views."

"Well?"

"Then we went somewhat into the matter of your father's death; and he gave me the straight statement that if your father was dead, he was killed by the man who is behind this girl in her attempt to personate his heir. He says that the proof is to be had that the slayer was one Elmer Conroy; and as Conroy he recognized the man whom you saw in her company. Is not that important enough to cause me to come to you at once? If he escapes our eyes now, and knows that his identity has been discovered, then, will we find him again?"

"It cannot be!" exclaimed the girl, as she looked keenly in the face of the man.

"Surely he would not dare—"

"Oh, this man will dare anything, as you certainly ought to be able to guess from the little you have seen of him. If you can give no other reason to doubt Armstrong's word, save what the man he calls Elmer Conroy would or would not dare to do, I think it would be as well to accept it without further question. I would do so were it not for what he afterward told me; and the offer he made—which, by the way, I accepted, either on your account, or my own, if you did not care to accept. It is a matter of a thousand or two, perhaps; but you would give twice as much to see him succeed in what he proposed. And I ought not to call it a proposition, either. He wouldn't allow that name to be given to it. It was a bet, pure and simple."

"A bet! For one that has been trusted as I have trusted you, I think you have shown but little regard for me and my confidences if you make them the subject of a bet with a desperate gambler like this Mr. Armstrong. Do you want me to hate you altogether?"

"Do I want— You know better than that; and can rest assured that not a thing was done by me that was not distinctly in your interest. You do not ask what it was that Mr. Armstrong was willing to lay his wager on."

"I do not ask because I do not care to know. I suppose it has something to do with this Elmer Conroy, who is such a broadly bad man that he can be used as a scapegoat for others who would avert suspicion from themselves."

In the natural order of things Tom Raymond never felt quite so sure of there being anything in Jack's supposition as he did just then, when he heard it ignorantly sneered at. If he had cared less for the girl, he might have played with her longer; and perhaps wound up by losing his temper at her incredulity, and lack of curiosity.

But he could not defer the good news longer—for such it began to seem to him.

"Wrong, all wrong! It has nothing to do with Conroy, and it is something that you would care to know; something that I would not keep from you for a fortune. When Jack Armstrong offers a bet on doing something, it is safe to suppose that he does not do it to throw away money. He has wagered that not only is Stephen Lord not dead, but that he can produce him within a reasonable time. I have accepted his wager, and this minute I firmly believe that he will win it."

There was a triumphant air of conviction in his tone that went further than he knew. For the moment it seemed to the girl that Raymond had something more that he might tell—something that, were he to say it, might make her altogether certain. For once in her life she showed she could be unnerved by what she might hear. She stared at him, threw up her hands and staggered back without a word.

Tom thought that she was going to fall, and sprung toward her with his arms outstretched, but she motioned him feebly back.

"Not yet. I will not faint. It is so sudden. Pray that it may be true, and that I may know the truth soon enough to save one innocent life, if not two."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LATEST ARRIVAL AT THE HOME.

THERE was something in the words of the girl as she cowered away from him that half told to Tom Raymond that which as yet he had not suspected. And only half told. He did not understand; yet it seemed to him that his was the innocent life that was to be saved; and that this revelation was to be of more value than he had dreamed of, not only to Hebe but to himself. He would have been but too glad to press his views, to have convinced her then and there that the good news must be true; that he ought to be allowed to share to the full in the happiness of the occasion.

A good deal to his surprise, however, he found that at the end of a minute or two Hebe seemed further away from him than ever. As she grew stronger there was a hard look in her face that he had never before seen on it. He scarcely recognized the woman.

There was something in her voice, that sounded strangely metallic, as she spoke:

"The time has not come when I can explain to you all that this means to me if it should turn out to be true. And before I can meet you again, or attempt any further explanation, I must see this Mr. Armstrong, and learn if possible all that he knows. He must know more than he has told; and though he may not be the kind of a man one would care to trust more than was needed, yet he may be the man for me. Something told me so when I first laid eyes on him."

"Whatever you may have heard against him be sure that he is not as black as he is painted. You insisted on my visiting him; and whatever may be learned from that visit will really go to your credit. If you wish, I will go with you to him, now. It may be hard to find him later on."

"No. I cannot see him now. I am too tired, too unnerved to care to meet a man whom it may be necessary to handle with care. And there is something else that I must hear before I even meet the man. If you believe that there is anything more to be learned from him, see him yourself; but, do not attempt to hold communication with me again until I send for you. It will not be long that you will have to wait; and I believe it will be far better for us so. Leave me now. What you have told me has had its effect, deeper than appears on the surface. What that effect is I will one day tell you. For the present I can say no more."

The brief interview was over, and Raymond found himself dismissed before he had time to offer one of the dozen or more suggestions that he had thought of when he was waiting to meet her. He went away trying to reconcile what he knew with what he had just seen, and succeeded but badly. When everything was a mystery, save that Stephen Lord was reputed to have been murdered, he appeared to have her confidence, and she was willing to talk fast enough. Now, when there seemed to be some light breaking on the subject, she had little to say, and sent him off in as great haste as though he had never been admitted into her confidence. He decided to see Jack Armstrong again, and perhaps ask for his advice. Meantime, if there was any way of doing it—even to shadowing the little sport—he intended to get on the trail of this mysterious Elmer Conroy.

As Armstrong remained in the Home for the greater part of the evening, it was not so hard to keep track of him, though there was a time when he thought the sport had retired for the night, and he had almost given him up. He was regretting that he had not utilized the opportunity for an interview when Jack started out on his quest for Barney Kain. He followed then, and saw something of what went on at the dance-house. He saw the two come out together, and would not have known that he had his game in sight had he not been able to get close enough to overhear the greater part of the conversation that passed between the two men. Then, when Jack was at one window Tom Raymond was at another, and saw the man go down:

Raymond was something like the sport. He doubted the evidence of his senses. Conroy might be dead, but for the present he did not care to believe it. When the body was carried away from Mart's he followed it, leaving Mr. Armstrong to return to the Home unwatched.

If the whole thing was a theatrically-arranged fraud, it was certainly well carried out. The seeming dead man was carried well out of the town, and it was no easy matter to track the party, who did and said nothing to show that they were not carrying the corpse of one for whom they had a great deal of respect. With Raymond's view of the case, it seemed to him that they rather expected to be followed, and had no objection; that they would probably keep up the farce until it was certain that no curious eyes could detect the nature of their game.

The result justified him in his belief. He was able to see the resurrection of the body. Very much alive was Elmer Conroy when he flung a long, disguising cloak over his shoulders, donned a broad-brimmed sombrero, and threw himself upon one of the horses that were awaiting the party. When they all rode silently away, Tom returned to

Doubledeck somewhat puzzled what to do next. There would have been no use to attempt to follow the gang that had been at Mart's; and it was now, probably, too late to find Mr. Armstrong.

"One thing is certain; he does not intend to figure on the Doubledeck carpet again as Elmer Conroy. All that trouble would not have been taken unless he intended to return as some one else. No doubt the time has come when he expects to strike; and such a man will do that after his own way. Perhaps it would be no more than an act of wisdom to warn Haddington of the game that is to be set up on him. He may know about the girl who claims the Gray Mare; but I doubt if he understands who is her mentor. It might make him more open to reason when Hebe urges her own claim."

So the young man thought as he pursued his way back to town. As he did not know of the mistake which Gentle Jack had been laboring under when he chipped into the riot at the dance house he was a little puzzled to make out his reasons for taking a hand in behalf of the man for whom he had professed so much hatred. He could only account for it on the supposition that Armstrong wanted to save the man for his own vengeance. But, if that was the case, why had not the men settled matters when they were talking outside of the building. Perhaps they had done so; for their conversation appeared suspiciously amicable. That idea was the faintest of suspicions, but it was one that he could not get rid of altogether. In his then humor it was as well that he did not have the opportunity to exchange confidences with Judge Haddington. They might have both got far enough off of the right track to have made serious mischief.

When he was once more in town he passed, or had to pass, the Home. The hour was pretty late, and he did not expect to see any one about, for it was a well-regulated house. If its doors were kept open all night, to allow of the ingress and egress of its boarders, these came and went with as little noise as was possible, or if they forgot themselves, they were apt to hear from the proprietor the next morning.

It was something of a surprise, then, to note that there was considerable bustle about the door; and that there had just been an arrival, by a special coach, that was attracting considerable attention. The landlord was out, to receive his guest, and the attaches were around with a lantern, to look after the luggage; while there were a dozen spectators, who had turned up in the mysterious way that is usual on such occasions. Raymond reached the scene in time to see the traveler dismount, and to hear him ask:

"Have you a young lady stopping here, by the name of Lord? She is my niece, and I suppose she must have arrived several days ago."

"What new complication is this?" thought Raymond. "It begins to look—I declare, I don't know how it looks. Wonder if Armstrong knows anything about *this* man? It might be worth while to ask him."

And very much puzzled was Tom Raymond, over what this arrival might mean.

CHAPTER XXX.

SOME VERY STRAIGHT TALK.

WHEN Armstrong arose the following morning he knew nothing about the arrival of the gentleman who was registered on the books as Henry Thorne. He was not thinking about new arrivals, or troubling himself much over the Gray Mare Mine, and the various parties who claimed it. What he was concerned over was the continued absence of Barney Kain. He was really attached to the little Irishman, without taking account of the fact that any blow at the man was probably aimed at the master.

Having assured himself that Barney had not yet come in, Gentle Jack thought the matter over. He had not a doubt of Barney's loyalty, and he felt sure that there had been foul play of some kind; by whom, was what he desired to figure out.

The attentions of McCarthy seemed to throw suspicion toward the judge, but there were other parties to be considered.

It was possible that Conroy, or some of his men—for he seemed to have a regular gang at his back—might have thought it

worth while to pay attention to the little Irishman. And then, there were the men with whom Kain had been involved in a row. They might have found their chance, and taken in McCarthy along with him. The strangest thing was that there was no trace of the two men after they left the Daisy. Though he inquired around, and went over the ground himself, between the two saloons, he could hear nothing further; nor could he find anything to show that there had been anything of a difficulty along the route that must have been taken by the two.

When he had exhausted inquiry to no purpose, and was thinking of taking his pistols in his hands, and going to seek the judge, to ask what had become of McCarthy, he found out that the question was being asked by some one else. Several men from the mine were floating around town, in search of the manager. They had already been at the judge's, without eliciting any information; and now they were starting in on the hunt of the trail, with an obstinate intention to mark it down.

That suited Jack, exactly. He did not care to make too many inquiries himself, but he was willing enough to take advantage of those made by any one else. By keeping his ears open, in the course of an hour it was not hard to come to the conclusion that both men were missing.

"Is it the work of the two ruffians who so nearly had McCarthy out of the wind when Barney came to the rescue; or is it the work of Conroy? The toughs were in dead earnest about getting rid of him; but it would be mighty convenient for Conroy to have the boss out of the way if he intended to jump the claim. It would take plenty of nerve to try that last on a mine like the Gray Mare, but Elmer has nerve for a dozen, and hits it right when he thinks the safest way to prove title is to show possession. If he is the party that went for them, the question is whether they are dead, or only laid back to rest until they are no longer in the way. I can hardly afford to let time show, as I need Barney too badly, just now."

So he reasoned as he strolled back to the Home. And as he reached the hotel he gained his first sight of the guest who had arrived on the previous night.

He was standing at a window, talking to the young lady known as Miss Lord, and a very respectable-looking, elderly gentleman did he seem to be. If it had not been for his companion, Jack would have scarcely given him a second thought, but seeing him with Lillian Lord, he fancied that it must mean another move in the game, and when he got inside of the house he made his inquiries, accordingly.

"Came in a special coach last night, did he? And the girl's uncle! Ahem! If the young lady is a fraud, what do you suppose the old gentleman can be? Just an older fraud, and no mistake. That is putting one and one together, to make two; and it wins every time. And who is the fraud that always plays it alone about the end of the game? Elmer Conroy. He has come to life marvelously soon after the demise of last night, but I guess he thought there was not much time to waste. I must have a closer look, though it's dollars to dimes that I know him like a book, already."

It was not hard to get that closer look. The man stood at the window openly, and even as though he courted attention. He was talking earnestly to the girl he had called his niece. At first it seemed as though they might be having some difference of opinion; there was a frown on her face, and she looked as though she was wishing that the place was not so public, that she might enter a still more vigorous protest to what he was saying. If Jack Armstrong could have been near enough to overhear what was passing between them, he would have found that he had made no mistake when he said to himself that, however Lillian might seem to receive his statements, what he had told her was neither entirely disbelieved, nor to be totally forgotten.

Mr. Thorne, as the arrival had given him name on the register, had rested satisfied with the intelligence that his niece was stopping at the Home, and had gone quietly to bed. After all, there was no reason why she should be awakened, and no one thought

anything strange in the delay in announcing his presence.

He was up betimes the next morning, however, and managed to meet the young lady without any one else in the house seeing the interview, which was brief enough. Whatever was in the mind of Lillian, she kept her wits about her at the real surprise; and went to breakfast with him as though she had been expecting him all along. At the table they paid strict attention to business, and Lillian managed to get away by herself long before her uncle had finished the hearty meal that he stowed away. It was some time before they met again for the interview, part of which was witnessed by Mr. Armstrong.

"My evil genius has found me again, it seems," was her salutation as they met. "Could you not trust me out of your sight, or what is the reason for this masquerade, which to me seems to have more of danger than profit in it?"

"Reasons are as plenty as blackberries; but the real one you hit at the first cast. I cannot trust you by yourself. And, to be frank, my face is better known than I had supposed, and as I must be on the ground when the heavy work begins, I thought it safest to come in a shape that was its own excuse and protection. To tell the truth, by way of variety, I have not that implicit confidence in you that I once had; and after thinking over the remarks of the witch, I am almost inclined to believe that you may be as big a fraud as myself. She spoke as though it was by the card, and you did not appear to the best advantage while you were listening to her remarks. After drawing me into this tangle I do not propose that you are to make any failure at the last moment. As Stephen Lord's daughter you have been posing; and as such I propose that you continue to pose to the end of the chapter, even if he rises from his grave to repudiate you. You understand me, I hope."

"Only too well. It matters little to you who I may really be, so that I serve your purpose in getting hold of that mine, and the wealth that lies or is supposed to lie within it. But no fraud am I, in spite of the insane ravings of that mad woman. Or, if she is not mad, then, that mouthpiece of the man who has stolen the wealth that should be mine—that man who, perhaps, was the very assassin of my father. And yet, I can scarcely believe that of him. If I was in my right senses I would know that the crime lies at some one else's door; and I would, first of all, bring it home to the murdering wretch, who could not escape my hand if I once had the nerve to try to close it. Are you not sometimes afraid that your tool will turn on you, and die trying to make her teeth meet? If you knew all that I have been thinking since last I saw you, it might well make you pause, and perhaps go back. I know not how strong may be the mysterious charm which binds me to your service, but I swear to you that I believe I shall one day break it. When that time comes, look out for yourself. When I get back the will of my own that you have robbed me of, I think you will be in deadly danger."

Her words, when coldly repeated, seemed wildly passionate, perhaps, but they were not uttered with any such accents. Slowly, evenly, she spoke, and at that moment it was only a suspicion of the truth that reached Jack Armstrong as he looked up and saw the two together.

The man did not appear to be troubled a particle. He smiled good-naturedly, and with the license of old rage reached over and patted her on the cheek in a fatherly sort of way as he answered:

"Really, my child! The witch must have been making some rash assertions before I came on the carpet. You should not work yourself up to such a fever-heat over what you hear, since there will always be enough in what you can see for yourself to arouse your indignation. What you have just been saying shows that I was not mistaken in thinking that it was important for me to be near you, where I could keep an eye on your movements, and encourage you in such fits of mental despondency as the one in which I find you. I am not at all afraid that you will work me any serious harm, and have no objection to a private outburst now and then, if you think it does you any good.

You will go straight ahead in the course that we have marked out, and after we have rescued the property of your father and settled with the thieves, you can open up the subject of who killed Stephen Lord as fast and as far as you may want to. By that time I will have interests elsewhere, and will not feel called on to interfere with your amusements."

"It is true, then? You admit the charge that he died by your—"

The man gave a wave of his shapely fingers, and smiled on her a little drearly.

"I admit nothing—solely on general principles. But there has been enough of this folly. I have permitted it to go this far to see just how unhealthy your mind might be. I know enough. If I leave you to your own bent, a very pretty mess you would try to make of things. Henceforth, until our work here is done, you will remember that I am your master, whatever else I may be, and you will cease these foolish struggles until I give you leave to begin them again. I must treat you like a rational human being, I perceive, and yet keep you in leading-strings. I have taken it for granted that it was the truth you told me in regard to being Lord's daughter; but, truth or falsehood, it is too late to go back now. If I can keep an eye on you, I have no doubt that, with the proofs you have, you will come off with flying colors, even if the matter was carefully investigated."

"Of that part I have no fears," responded the girl, slowly, and as though all the anger and spirit of revolt was vanishing, if not already gone.

"So much the better. We will move on the works at once. Haddington has shown no sign that he is willing to investigate your claims in a friendly spirit; we will give him a chance to prove his own when we once get him out. Happy chance that brought us together! I will find satisfaction in doing my duty; and for you, the wrongs of the fatherless will be avenged. You can go now. I do not think that any more fancies will take possession of you for the present, and I will have my eye on you for the future."

This was the substance of the conversation—pity that Gentle Jack could not have overheard it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN TO THE FIRE.

THE disappearance of Barney and the foreman of the Gray Mare had certainly been managed very neatly; and the three men who did the work were past masters in the business, not to have left any signs that were to be found by such keen eyes as those that looked for them.

What was even more remarkable was the fact that they could get away with men like McCarthy and the little Irishman before they had even a suspicion of danger.

But an expert with a rope can do execution at long range that is as effective as that with firearms, and noiseless, to boot. If the two victims had been mounted there would no doubt have been some traces of where they fell, that would not have escaped Mr. Armstrong. But since they were on foot, it was just a cast, a dexterous wrench, and they were down, with the nooses drawn so tightly that their breath was altogether shut off. A couple of minutes more of it, and they would never have found out who hurt them, or what was the matter. As it was, they were gagged and bound before they had more than a hazy idea of what had happened. Even when the loops were loosened, it took some time for their wits to come back; and for a little it was not so certain that they ever would. It is pretty hard lines when a man has to choke, and gag, and strangle, and fight for his breath, with his mouth stopped, and an indefinite number of yards of rope around him; to say nothing of his being hustled along without the least regard for his comfort or safety.

As McCarthy was the heaviest, the smaller men of the captors took hold of him; but Barney was dragged along by the collar for a bit, and then flung over the shoulder of the third man. In this way the two were deported from Doubledeck, and no one was any the wiser.

When, at length, Barney felt himself flung carelessly to the ground, he imagined that the crisis had arrived, and that he would

either have his throat cut right away, or else find out what this was all about. By this time he had discovered that McCarthy was in the same fix as himself, and could not be blamed with the treachery that he had at first suspected. Whether he was being carried away on his own account, on that of McCarthy, or of Mr. Armstrong, he had yet to find out; but whichever it was, he was mad enough about it to do for all the three.

"Let the vile dog lie there till the rope has been fixed. As for the other, why not cut his throat and save trouble? Better would it have been had we done so at the start, and saved much labor. Why should he be carried a mile when all that is wanted is to slay him?"

"For that matter, what was the use for the other, either? Might have left two corpses lying there, an' that would have bin ther end ov it, an' we wouldn't hev bin runnin' all this risk fur nothin. Talk sense, can't ye, Spanish?"

"Sense! Ah, it is revenge that I am speaking of. Nothing but the rope for the dog whose dirty fist struck me down!"

"That's right enough ez fur ez it goes; but can't yer see thet I may hev it in fur his pard just ez big; an' that ef you want ther rope fur your man I may want somethin' more fur mine? I seen you a-pipin' them, an' you seen me a-doin' ther same; an' we agreed ter go in ez pards tell we kerried through what we was after. Pards we is, an' you kin do what yer like with your man ez long ez you don't interfere with ours. Ef that don't suit, say ther word an' we'll take 'em both. We hev sumthin' in fur your man, but we was willin' ter give him ter you ef we was certain we was a-placin' him in good hands. Ef they ain't good, we kin hev a new deal, jest too quick; an' you out in ther cold."

Barney heard all this, and it was not hard to place the men and understand the situation. The Mexican was after him for the affair at Mart's, while the other two were the men who had been on the war-path for McCarthy, and whom the latter thought he had bluffed out of town after Barney had turned them over, and saved his life.

There was plenty of savage hate in the tones of the men, but it was not likely that they would come to anything like a serious misunderstanding; and so, unless some unforeseen interruption occurred, the three men would probably have the opportunity to work their separate and wicked wills on their prisoners.

The threat of the outlaw brought the Mexican to his senses. There were two men against him, and they were probably as bad as he was.

"Have it thine own way, then; so long as thou hast no word to say against what I have in store for this wretch. His pockets have I turned out, and they were fairly filled. The plunder on the other man is thine, of course. See to it, and then help me with the rope, as I asked of thee. There will be something for Doubledeck to talk of when the corpses are found to-morrow."

There really was no joke in this thing about the rope. They had the cord all ready, and noosed about Barney's neck, and one end of it swung over the limb of the convenient tree that they had been seeking. Since they had come to some sort of agreement, all three took hold, and Barney would have been swinging in another second or two.

Fortunately there was an interruption, as unexpected as it was welcome to Barney Kain. First there was the sound of nearing footsteps. Then came a harsh challenge:

"Hello! You, there! What's going on here? Hands up, and no nonsense, or there will be cold meat all around! Blamed if they ain't hanging a brace of the boys, after turning their pockets inside out. Down with them!"

Keen eyes it took to see what was going on, but then the new-comers were very near, and were accustomed to take in about all that was to be seen at the first glance. There was a clicking of firearms, and a steady rush, that sounded as though it would sweep away the three without a pause.

No doubt it would have done it if they had remained, but when it had reached the spot the three men were no longer there. They did not pause to elevate their digits.

Without knowing who it was that was coming, they felt pretty sure that in case they remained the rope would be around their own necks in a twinkling, since that was the style of Doubledeck justice to men caught red-handed in such a fault.

The attacking party did not seem to be at all anxious to have them remain, and the spokesman, who had been so anxious to have them downed, gave something like a chuckle as he saw them run.

"One or two of you have an eye on them that they don't come sneaking back. They may think they got away too easy, and want to have it over again. I will see how much damage the fools have really done. Nothing more than a big scare, I reckon.

He stooped and cut the cords that confined Barney's limbs, and pulled the gag away from his mouth, looking down curiously at the prisoner as he did so. After all, it was more the mental than the physical condition of the men that he was interested in.

There was little delay in finding how Barney felt. The moment that he felt the cords loosen, and the gag drop away from his mouth, he sprang to his feet, and began to talk. His hand dropped mechanically for his revolver, of course, and when he found that it was gone, as well as the limited amount of capital that he had brought with him, he had a great deal more to say than the men who had come to his rescue cared to listen to. From Barney the leader turned to McCarthy, whom he found a good deal less demonstrative, and considerably more anxious to learn into whose hands they had fallen.

The inspection in this case appeared to be satisfactory.

"One of them is all right, anyhow; and we may find use for the other; but I'll swear it is the simon-pure Irishman, and no one else."

So much he muttered rather than spoke. Then, with a harsher tone, he turned to Barney.

"Young man, we are not so much interested in what those men have done to you, or what you are going to do to them. The latter can keep until we are done with you. If you know which side your bread ought to be buttered you will quietly come along. We don't deal in cords, or gags, or any such nonsense; but when our man don't come up to the rack we kill him and have no more foolishness. Come along, or stay here for good. And McCarthy, you are a man of sense. You will come along without threats or trouble. You are the man we want; and perhaps you will caution your friend to keep still if he wants to save his wretched little life. We have no use for him, actually; and only take him along as company for you, and because we daren't let him go, and don't care to cut his throat."

Barney Kain was quiet already. If he was as surprised as he looked—and the look was not put on for effect, since no one could notice his expression—he really had nothing to say. About that time he recognized that his troubles had only just begun.

His surprise did not interfere with his locomotive powers, nor did it affect his common sense. If he had only had a bit of a switch, even, it might have been worth while to go in for fun; but with his bare hands against the revolvers that he could dimly see, ready for immediate execution, there was nothing to be made and everything to be lost. He marched off with as good grace as possible, McCarthy stalking by his side.

The manager of the Gray Mare had nothing to say for some time, but moved on automatically. And at last he only whispered:

"Heavens and earth, Barney! They are taking us straight for the Gray Mare. What do you think is afloat now?"

But Barney answered never a word. He was keeping up a prodigious thinking.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ADVANTAGES OF PHILOSOPHY.

To a certain extent Mr. Armstrong was in the habit of making a confidant of the little Irishman, and it was not to be supposed that Barney knew nothing of what was going on in regard to the Gray Mare Mine. He had thought he understood the reason for the original attack; and now the few words of McCarthy gave him an idea of the meaning

of the second capture. There was a movement on foot against the mine; McCarthy was to be kept out of the way; and he would be retained in his company for fear that he might give an alarm. After all, it was not likely that he was in present danger of any personal violence, and when the attack had been made he would be turned loose if nothing unforeseen happened to him. Of course, there were the chances of war to be met, and a stray bullet might take him off; but altogether he felt easier than he had done as the captive of the savage Mexican and his allies.

He had given McCarthy all the warning he thought was needed in the matter, and the mine-boss had rather slighted the danger, intimating that they were always on guard and ready for an attack. There might be a chance to see whether the vaunt would be made good.

Nothing did he say of what was in his mind, but he kept as close to McCarthy as he could conveniently get, and waited for more information. When there was a pointer in the wood Simon seemed to be the sort of man to call attention to it.

And sure enough, before long Simon gave a sigh of relief, that was barely audible, as the party made a turn that took them out of the direct route for the mouth of the mine. Barney knew little about the location; but he understood what McCarthy meant, and only watched closer than ever.

As he had never visited the mine, nor heard any description of its surroundings, he could not tell much about the course that was being taken, or where they would bring up at; but when the time came, he could get information enough from Simon to give him an understanding of where they were. And if they did not go direct to the entrance of the mine they certainly came to what seemed the entrance to a mine, hidden and little used though it appeared. There was a rope hidden near, and without any explanation the two prisoners were lowered into the shaft. The descent was brief, and at the bottom of the shaft a drift led them away for a few rods, when they found themselves in a chamber that suited admirably well for a dungeon. There the two were left, with a caution that they should behave themselves if they did not want to get into a smaller box, and a great deal worse one. A lantern had been lit, to find the way thither, but the men took it away with them; and so the prisoners seated themselves in the darkness, to reflect on the very uncomfortable predicament they found themselves in.

As there was no telling how near a listener might be it was not policy for them to do much talking; yet it was a predicament in which before long silence would grow worse than death itself. When they had been there what seemed like hours, though it lacked considerable of being sixty minutes, McCarthy came sidling up to the Irishman.

"Barney," he whispered; "we are in for it now. I heard them fastening up the drift. They must intend to leave us here to die in the darkness. I had better have taken your caution and stayed in the cabin at the top of the shaft, watching the Gray Mare. They have us, and they mean to have the mine before they get done with us. What's the best thing you can think of? I swear, I am abroad, and can't think of a thing except that they are going to make the rifle, and we can do nothing to hinder."

"Faith, an' it's a moighty bad box we're in, sure enough; an' it's nixt to nothing Oi know about sich places. Perhaps they're not as bad as ye paint 'em. We'll wait until we see phat they are going to do wid us. Plinty av toime have we, for they are not riddy to catch on to-noight. It's a long noight an' day we have forninst us; an' we may az will take it aizy. Go to slape, me darlint, an' say av ye can't dr'ame ov the way out. But don't bodder me wid yer downheartidness. It's bad enough Oi fale widout it. Have ye iver been here afore?"

"Of course. It's the Jim Bowers claim; and as barren as a limekiln. It's not far off the vein, but it might as well be a thousand miles for all the color that was ever taken out of it. These folks seem to be at home here, but how they ever got so familiar without our finding it out is more than I can tell."

"It's not supposin' that ye kin tell. Sure,

an' they are the b'yes that worruk in the darkniss, an' av ye don't kape yer own fencis well up ye'll foinde their cattle in yer clover. It's a shlaape ye had bettther be goin', an' be riddy for phat comes. It's wide awake they will be tell they think we are toired out wid thryin' for fraydom; an' thin will be the toime to take the advanthage. There was niver a jail from here to Connaught that could howld Barney Kain whin they warn't watchin' ov him, an' his hands wor ontied."

With this advice Barney withdrew himself from the conversation, eased himself against the stone wall of the chamber, and in spite of the darkness and the dampness was soon asleep and snoring.

His companion was not so philosophical, and imagined that he was of more importance than two or three Barney Kains, so it took a good while for him to compose his nerves, and find the slumber that actually seemed to court the other.

But sleep came after awhile, and though their rest was not of the sweetest, they managed to get in slumber enough to practically fill in the night.

There was something of a surprise when they found, the next morning, that they were not only not forgotten, but that they were to be liberally cared for. There was a breakfast at hand, and a jug of water, left by two silent men, one of whom carried a lighted lantern and a cocked revolver.

"Ye say it wor no use to fash oursilves; whin the toime comes it all goes roight. Take it aisy, av ye'r' at the ind av a rope," remarked Barney, as he proceeded to do full justice to the rough meal that was before them.

"That's well enough for you. Your wages go on all the same, and you are used to waiting. If you are not on the carpet your boss can do without you, and there is no great harm done; but while I am rotting in this cussed hole the Gray Mare may be going to ruin. It is time that we began to try to get out."

"Do ye say onny way av eshscape?"

"I confess that I don't; but it's not likely that we will without looking for it."

"An' av we did, don't ye think they would be watchin' av it? It's all they will be afther havin' to do this hull blissid day. Whin noight comes on they will have the rist av the worruk to be lookin' afther; an' thin will be the hour we'll be afther shkippin'. Aizy be jerruks, an' take Barney Kain's advice."

"Och, Mickey McGlural has wan purthy daughter, That lads come courthin' around be the score. They shmoile, an' they ogle, but me heart is quoite aizy, Since Peggy has kissed me forninst the back door."

Swate Peggy McGlural,
Ritural!

Ouch! Howld me, my darlint, Oi'm kilt."

Very softly did Barney hum to himself the verse of his favorite song, as he eased himself back, and drew from his pocket a short clay pipe and a handful of tobacco. After all, the Mexican had left him what was better than money. He twisted the bowl of his dudheen full of the rankest leaf, lit a match as he once more hummed over the chorus, and then, so far as all outward appearance went, was perfectly happy.

McCarthy was uneasy enough; but he could see that there was wisdom in the advice of his fellow-prisoner, and tried to make the best of the situation, though he did not expect to wait until night before beginning his explorations for an outlet.

It was a wearisome day, to say the least of it. McCarthy had once more the idea that they were going to starve him, long before the men came with their next meal. When they brought it in, Barney seemed to be taking another nap, and McCarthy supping on despair.

"Make ther most ov that," said one of the men, as he placed the pan on the floor.

"It's all you'll get to-day. We got something else ter do besides waitin' on you galoots. An' ef yer wants anything real bad, jest keep on a-wantin' till we git back. It won't do no good ter holler, fur ther won't be no one nearer than a mile. You kin keep ther pan till to-morrer; ther' won't be no one ter come fur it."

This in a surly way; then they hustled out

as if in too great a hurry to wait for an answer.

"Onto'rely too anxious," laughed Barney. "They're goin'; but not now. May as well kape peaceable till after they come back to say phat we're doin'. Thin, it's a move we'll be makin' that will astownd him."

Kain was pretty certain that they were in the hands of men who did not do things by halves; and he wanted to act accordingly. If there was any false movement, it would be apt to result in shutting off altogether every chance for escape. While there was no doubt some sort of provision made for keeping them in the little chamber, he believed that its security lay in the guards that were watching the outlet. And he reasoned quite shrewdly about the relaxation of their vigilance as time wore on. It was hard to do; but the waiting game was what he intended to play, and what he did play. There was a faint hope that either the judge or Mr. Armstrong might find them; but it would not do to rely entirely on that. The judge might have his hands full with the affairs of the mine; and Armstrong was a stranger to the place, and could not at once catch on to its ways and means.

Barney made no mistake in thinking that the guard would be back again. They appeared in a worse humor than ever; said something about being left in the coop to watch them; took up the pan, and hurried away.

Again some little time elapsed; then Barney arose like another man, and said it was time to act. He turned up the lantern, that he had prudently kept barely lighted for the most part of the time since that morning, and advanced into the drift, with McCarthy at his back. A few paces brought them to the door, the closing of which had first broken McCarthy's nerve.

It was well that they had the light with them. As far as feeling went, they would probably never have found the vulnerable spot. On either side of the narrow passage was a heavy timber, set in originally to shore the roof as much as for the purpose to which it was afterward put. To these was fastened the heavy door that had lock and hinges on the outer side, showing that the place was intended for a prison. With solid rock, and two-inch plank in front of them, it did not look as though much progress could be made; but when he was almost ready to give it up, Barney fancied he saw the vulnerable spot he had been sure existed somewhere.

The passage was some seven or eight feet high at this place, and the heavy frame-work so jammed in that it was folly to think of moving it; but, on one side, and near the top, there seemed a spot where the rock had crumbled somewhat. There was a chance that it was softer than that below. He placed the lamp on the floor, had McCarthy standing under the spot in a jiffy, and was up on his shoulders, trying it.

The rock was even more crumbling than he had hoped, and with the jack-knife he had hidden away in his boot it would cut away even faster than if it had been clay. He attacked it without delay. He thought he could make a breach in an hour. He could not have cut through the door in a day.

Barney had been living so long on what he did, and his knowledge of how to do it, that he did not make any mistakes in judgment. The only question was whether Simon could stand the pressure for that length of time.

There is nothing very thrilling in chipping rotten stone with a jack knife. It took an hour to get through, but they did it, after some hard tugging and squeezing.

Then they found nothing to stop them until they were in the main drift. McCarthy would have hurried away to the shaft, but Barney had an idea beyond mere escape.

"Sure, an' it's quarely silent it is; an' mebbe it wad be as will to say av ther's nothin' goin' on beyant. Lit's explore a thrifle. Av ye go daper down it's chance av ye don't foind somethin' worruth whoile."

And, as usual, Barney was right. Following the drift along they found that there were men at work; and even drew close enough to them to overhear part of their conversation. The mine was not vacated, after all. All hands were at work. That was enough. They turned back and made their way to the shaft safely, and found the rope in place.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JUDGE LYNCH RISES—AND SITS DOWN AGAIN.

THE judge was not idle when he found out about the disappearance of his manager, which he did at an early hour the next morning. The men from the mine posted him as to the fact, and, in any event, he would have begun to be anxious, since he had an appointment with McCarthy to visit the Gray Mare, and see about putting it into still better shape for defense. What Jack Armstrong had told him was not without effect, though he was inclined to keep the intelligence as much as possible to himself.

Although he did not altogether believe that the man he had once known as Elmer Conroy had returned to life, and was concerned in the movement that he knew was on foot, yet it gave him more uneasiness to hear it so stated than he would have cared to admit. The uncertainty was perhaps more terrible than the fact would have been.

The disappearance of McCarthy looked like Conroy's old-time, reckless way of doing business, and put Haddington on his guard as he would not have been if it had not been for the warning of the little sport. He rather thought that his right-hand man was dead and buried, and had his men out looking for the corpse, or traces of its removal.

The men had eyes that were no sharper than those of Mr. Armstrong; but they had a chance to hear more. It was not hard to learn that McCarthy and the Irishman had left the Daisy together, *en route* for Mart's, and had never arrived at that place. Then came the particulars of a fight at the saloon, in which a Mexican had been killed by a stranger, who was in turn nearly slain by the frequenters of the house before being rescued by Jack Armstrong, who carried him away after shooting out the lights. And a little afterward the man returned at the head of a gang, and threatened to wreck the house; but was shot down before getting to business, and his corpse carried away by his friends.

The suspicion seemed to be that this man was the chief of the Copper Caps, the band of road-agents that had been operating for some time in the vicinity of Doubledéck. And of course it naturally followed that many supposed Mr. Armstrong must have some connection with the gang or he would not have run any risks to aid the man who was in danger.

And out of this intelligence the judge was able to arrange some extra bits of intelligence. He was certain that Jack was working against him in the Gray Mare matter, and was backing Lillian, whom he was just as well satisfied was an unprincipled adventuress. If then Conroy had been in the plot—and up to this time he had been unwilling to admit that he was—Jack, upon his death, would no doubt take the lead. Perhaps it was jealousy of Conroy that had prompted him to give the pointer that he had; but, with the man out of his road, no doubt Gentle Jack would be just as desperate in his own way. Between his personal and his financial interests the judge had strong enough reasons to view the sport with suspicion; and he soon had a pretty bad case worked out against Mr. Armstrong. The next thing was to wish that Doubledéck was of his way of thinking; and to labor for its conversion.

He had a good part of the day before him, and all the men he was willing to spare from the mine, to manipulate public opinion. He did not wish to appear himself in the matter any more than was necessary, but Jack would have been surprised if he had known how effectually he was getting in his work.

Jack was not altogether idle himself; but his inquiries in regard to the missing man were made after his own careless fashion.

"A lovely position," he thought, as he entered the Daisy that evening. "Not a friend in the town, unless one can call Raymond, or the young lady he is so desperately smitten with, by that name. And what they can tell me about Barney will hardly go for much. Really, I think I must ask the judge what he has done with my man. If he don't know, and Conroy won't give me any information, I will have to wait on the course of events and keep my powder dry. There is certainly something wrong a-brewing."

He had no idea that Haddington was near

him; but when he had got thus far in his soliloquy he came face to face with the judge.

Jack had a smile for him at once. He nodded as if to an old friend, and strolled up to him in a confidential sort of way.

"Good-evening, Haddington! It was on my mind this very moment to hunt you up, and ask when they are coming back. I suppose it is all right; but, really, I can't very well get along without my man."

"I am not sure that I understand your object in asking that question, but it is probably a part with the brazen impudence that has characterized you ever since I have had my eyes on you. Such a question might better be asked of you by me. Mr. McCarthy has been missing since last night. When last seen he was in the company of your man. As I know it would be an object to you to have him out of the way it would only be natural for me to press the question home. There is no reason why Simon McCarthy should desert his interests here. If he has stayed away from his post to-day it was because he was kept away. Perhaps you could tell whether he is living or dead?"

"If he has been monkeying around Barney that would depend a good deal whether he shot him in the back. With a front view Mr. Kain can be trusted to keep about even with the rest of mankind, if he has to die for it. He is only my valet, to be sure, but I have the very highest respect for his shooting. I know little about your manager—or whatever his title may be—but I have a faint suspicion that he had confounded Barney and myself in his mind. Knowing how willingly you would see the world relieved of Mr. Armstrong, I can guess at the rest. And I must say, a very neat job it seems to have been."

If the judge and Jack had been alone together, or if the surrounding crowd had been neutral, this line might have done well enough. With the majority of the men in the room on the judge's side, and the most of them thinking as he spoke, it was, to say the least, a mistake.

There was a little gang of men from the Gray Mare standing near by, and from their lips came a low growl that was suggestive of danger, if Mr. Armstrong had been satisfied to take the warning. The judge had as much right as he to talk after this manner, and there were men there who might take fire at what he heard him say.

In self-defense Haddington would have had to take some notice of this insinuation. As it gave him a chance that he was none too good to have been yearning for, he jumped at the opportunity.

"When suspicion points so directly at you it would have been the part of wisdom to have kept yourself in the background. Instead of that, you have pushed yourself forward, and made a charge that only serves to call attention to your own possible guilt. I have hesitated to bring you to account, hoping against hope that my man might turn up. Now, since the question of guilt has been raised, the town must have the chance to hear both sides, and say who it is that is to be branded with the crime. It must be one of us, and I say that it is *you*! Doubledéck will judge between us."

"It is welcome to judge as much as it has a mind to, though I am not certain that I am going to admit the jurisdiction of the court. What is it that is charged?"

Short and sharp came Mr. Armstrong's words. He began to see that the house was with the judge, and that the judge meant trouble.

"The charge is that you have made away with Simon McCarthy, either with your own hands or those of your accomplices, and that you are an outlaw by profession, and one of the Copper Caps. There it is in plain words, and Doubledéck can and will make the most of it."

There were plenty of lowering faces around just then, and there rose an angry chorus of voices. If some one had led the way there were enough who would have followed in a rush on the smiling little sport who was staring so coldly at Haddington.

Mr. Armstrong was not at all dismayed. He did not at once speak, but his lips pursed in a singular sort of fashion as he listened to the comments that were being made. When

there was a little lull, at last, he took advantage of it in a matter-of-fact sort of way.

"As far as that nonsense about the Copper Caps is concerned, you must know there is nothing in it, since I have only just come to these parts, and that, too, in your company. As for what you say about McCarthy, it might be well to remember that Barney Kain is missing, too, and I don't see that it is exactly according to Gunter to try either of us until it is certain that one of them is dead. If you say that McCarthy has gone over the range, produce the corpse!"

"And I say that if there was a word of truth in what you so boastfully told me, then you are the confederate of the man once known as Elmer Conroy, and he is the chief of the Copper Caps. Beyond that I want to know nothing more for my own satisfaction. If Doubledeck is wise, it will relieve itself of your presence—if nothing more. If you were held as a prisoner there is no doubt in my mind what the evidence would be that would come to light. For myself, I do not care to bandy words with you; nor do I profess to be the dictator of what their proper course would be. Until I am positive that your own hands, or those of your servant, removed McCarthy, I want nothing more to do with you!"

"And then?" inquired Jack, with provoking coolness. He saw that the judge was flaming with wrath, but it only seemed to serve to amuse him.

"Then, I shall kill you," was the short retort.

"Haddington," was the slow response, accompanied with a thoughtful stare; "when I was a little shaver my parents called me John Armstrong, and from that day to this I have never been called anything else. How is it with you? I will give you a cold five hundred if you will tell me honestly what handle they had for you when I saw you last before I got into the stage the other day. I thought I would recognize a man again under any guise, but I'll swear that you beat me."

Was it the insolence of the question? or was there some deeper reason for it, that the judge's face changed color so that it was almost green, and he fell back a pace, as if to avoid a blow?

"Thanks, judge! You needn't say a word. I think I have you fixed."

Perhaps Jack would have treated them all, then and there, to a revelation or a reminiscence, but at that moment the crowd that had been looking and listening none too patiently, was ready to take a hand.

"Stand back, judge. We've heard of this galoot afore, an' he ain't the kind that Doubledeck admires. It's time fur him to retire, an' ef you please—let us at him."

The speaker swung the judge to one side, as he spoke, and there was a rush from behind, and a feverish yell that told what sort of business was on hand, and how it was intended that the little sport should retire.

"Down with ther man that murdered Sime McCarthy!" yelled another man, and, "Down with him!" rung the chorus.

Mr. Armstrong felt that he was in a tight place, and about all that was left for him was to do his best trying to make his teeth meet. His hands were in the side pockets of his sack coat; his fingers were touching a pair of triggers; it seemed to him that he saw back in the crowd the face of the man who was registered at the Home as Henry Thorne. He would make sure of him.

And then, over his shoulders was thrust a pair of revolvers, and a man who held them shouted at his elbow:

"Hold on here! What is this racket about? This man is as good as they make them, and I say I'm seeing fair play. Call them off, judge; it's all a mistake!"

And the man who spoke was Simon McCarthy!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LILLIAN GETS MORE LIGHT.

It was not necessary to call off the would-be lynchers. The appearance of McCarthy, and the active means he took to convince them all that he was on the other side, was proof of a mistake somewhere that could not well be gotten over, and the crowd fell back of its own accord.

"Thanks, awfully," said Jack as he turn-

ed his head a little to get a look at the man who had come to his rescue.

"I don't think I am mistaken in recognizing you as the *casus belli*, and I suppose it was lucky all around that you came when you did. I don't want to mar the solemnity of the occasion by an impertinent question; but, if it is all the same to you I would like to ask, what has become of Barney?"

"Oh, Barney is all right. I left him on the watch for some of our friends while I could come and hunt up the judge. Glad I was in time to put an end to that nonsense. You and the judge are both all wrong; and I want to bring you together. I must speak to him now, and quickly. Then I will have something to say to you."

Gentle Jack shrugged his shoulders as Simon pushed past him, and on toward the judge. He had something to say to some one else. He saw Tom Raymond in the distance, drawn thither by hearing something of what had been going on, and just now he would sooner talk to him than to any of the Gray Mare gang.

Neither Simon nor the judge watched his going; they had eyes only for each other. Although the four men left the house almost at the same moment, yet they went in couples, neither of which noted the other. Simon had made an almost imperceptible sign to several men who belonged at the mine, but he did not look back to see that they followed. He did not think they would fail to obey, and there was little time to waste. By the time they had struck the street he was explaining the cause of his absence, and what he and Barney had learned while making their escape.

"I thought I was a man of nerve," he said; "but they would have had me all broke up if it had not been for the little Irishman. I want you to see him as soon as you can, and have a talk with him. There is nothing in for you with either him or the sport, except what you are putting there. Fact is, it seems to be rather the other way. Of course he don't talk too free, but from what he does say it is not hard to see how the land lays."

"I will see him fast enough when the time comes, but just now the first thing to do is to save the mine. The boys are following, and we had better pick up some recruits if it can be done quietly. If there is to be a fight, we don't want too few or too many on hand. If you can look around without wasting time, I will go straight out. If your little Irishman happens to belong to the other side, he would have an elegant chance to give us all away, if you left him at the Gray Mare with only two of the boys to watch him. He wouldn't take more than one bite at them both."

"I'll risk him. And I'll back him to do the work of two more if it comes to a fight while we are away. I tell you the time is awfully short, and all I am afraid of is that they have jumped the claim already. If you will take my advice you will send me on out; and pick up the recruits yourself. And first and foremost, I'd get Mr. Armstrong into the ranks. He isn't the kind that will want everything laid out before he moves a step; but he gets there first and asks for explanation afterward. I told him to hold on a moment till I saw him, and if you go quick you may make a friend of him. For me he wouldn't stir a peg."

"Perhaps you are right. I will take your advice anyhow. Go for the mine, taking the boys with you, and I will follow as soon as I can."

Pretty thoroughly convinced that Elmer Conroy was not going to return to trouble him, the judge was now more than half ready to take McCarthy's view of the little sport; and thought it might be worth while to test him anyhow. To be sure, he was just going to have the man lynched, but as that had fallen through, he was perfectly willing to shake hands now, and call for a new deal.

McCarthy did not wait for another change of heart, but took his departure at once, so that Haddington had no opportunity to withdraw from the arrangement, even if second thought caused him to doubt the expediency of it. One moment of hesitation there really was, and then the judge turned away hurriedly from the spot, like a man that had made up his mind, and did not intend to alter it.

He knew that McCarthy had enough interest in the mine to keep him loyal, and

that he was a man that could be trusted, though he seemed a little off this evening. All his attention was now centered on getting his share of the work, as agreed on, done as quickly as possible. And he intended to speak first of all to Mr. Armstrong. If he had really been mistaken in that gentleman, this would be something of an apology and not a reparation.

Unfortunately Armstrong had found Tom Raymond, and after a brief conversation had moved rapidly away. As Haddington started back he caught a glimpse of the two men as they passed through a glare of light that flowed through the doors of a saloon some little distance away.

He did not care to call to the sport. That might be misconstrued. He preferred to follow quickly, though even that course was open to objection. As he stepped out he saw that they turned toward the Home Hotel, and he was at home there. Once under that roof and it would not be hard to arrange an interview. Little time as he had to spare, this was better than the possibility of a misunderstanding on the street.

As they came nearer to the hotel he quickened his steps, and began to overtake them rapidly.

"Lucky that we slipped out without drawing a crowd after us. If the gang at the Daisy could see this, they would swear that I had blood in my eye, and would want to go along to find out what was going to happen. I wouldn't care to have him look around just now, anyhow. He might think it his duty to try a snap-shot in my direction. It would be according to Doubledeck etiquette; and I declare I could hardly blame him. Ah! what is in the wind now?"

The judge stopped short in his soliloquy, and gazed ahead with more than curiosity. The two men had quickened their steps, and their gaze was fixed on two females who had suddenly come into view, as they were stepping upon the porch of the Home.

The judge had been away for some little time, and since his return had been too busy with his personal affairs to post himself on who had come and who had gone. At first sight he was satisfied that he had not seen either of the females before; and yet there was a something about them that was not altogether unfamiliar. For just an instant he half-fancied that the uncertain light deceived him, and that he recognized in one of the women the lady who was with him in the stage, and who laid claim to an interest in the Gray Mare. The other leaned heavily on her arm, and walked like an infirm old woman.

Before he could satisfy himself by another glance, the two passed into the shadow of the porch, and then entered the house. A little later the sport hurried up the steps, followed by Tom Raymond. Not far in their rear came Haddington. It was quite a procession.

Little as the distance seemed that separated the different sections, there was enough time between them for a straightforward person to accomplish a good deal. One of the ladies was Hebe Haywood, and she was very straightforward.

There was a light in the room in which Armstrong had seen Lillian Lord and her pretended uncle. It was the room that was used as a sitting-place for the guests of the house, and was called by courtesy the parlor. There was no pretension to style about it, and the little furniture was built with an eye to hard usage. If it had all been knocked to pieces in a free fight, and then thrown together again it would have looked little the worse for wear.

Still, the house had to have some place of the kind, even if, on emergency, there had to be two or three extra beds on the floor. This evening it was occupied again by Lillian Lord and her evil genius. The latter was sitting on a bench, smoking a cigar, while Lillian, at the window, looked out into the darkness, and listened to the noises without rather than to the words that were spoken within.

"And so, my dear, you still insist on the justice of your claim, though you are not so proud of the worthy relative who has dropped all his numerous affairs and come out here into the terrible peril of Western life to see you righted. I confess that to me you are rather a study. When I first heard

your story I swallowed it down like so much spring water, and decided that there was an opening for a handsome speculation for both of us. It did not suit me to come into Doubledeck just then, with drums beating and banners flying. I imagined it would be safer to pave the way by straightening out various other matters first. I had reasons for delaying your coming, and I delayed it. Still, I had no doubts of you, nor did I intend to desert you. I don't intend to desert you now; but I swear I can't say that I have no doubts. I suppose I could force you to tell me the truth, but then again I might get only the reflex of my own mind. Don't you think that you might as well open up down to the ground floor, and tell me that you are only a handsome adventuress, who has heard of Stephen Lord, and in some way got hold of the idea that I would be a good man to help you, and so poured your little history innocently into my ear, just to hear me say, as I did, 'Why, there's millions in this for you if you can prove that you are a daughter of that man.'

Miss Lillian shrugged her shoulders, and then looked somberly at the speaker.

"I told you my story, but it was not of my own free will. I neither wanted nor asked for your assistance then; and, completely as you have subjected my will to yours, I can say that I do not want it now. I take it because I cannot escape. I did not come to seek a fortune—it would not trouble me greatly if I did not get it. I was searching for my father. Why you should doubt the truth of the tale I told you before I knew you as you are is more than I can tell. Perhaps you don't, but are only trying me. Of what use is it! I own I am fascinated, as a bird by a rattlesnake. When you call me I must come, though we be miles apart. I cannot even be horrified by the wickedness I see in you, and I join in your schemes as though they were of my own planning. What reason can you have to mistrust, of all things, my identity?"

"A very fair synopsis of the case as it stands, and a question that here, where it is to be supposed there are no listeners, and if there were, our voices are too low for them to hear anything, I may admit that I never had a doubt as to who you were until I heard the remarks of the lady of the cabin. It strikes me that she cast some doubts on your pedigree; and she spoke by card."

"Perhaps the man called Armstrong did so too when he told me that you killed my father. You see that I have still independent thought, even if you can control my actions!"

"Possibly, possibly," retorted the man, without the shadow of hesitation or regret in his features. "When he talks, Gentle Jack is generally regarded as good authority; and in a matter of this kind the lady ought to be."

"And why?"

"Well, because—the interesting lady who poses as a prophetess and a seer, is the divorced wife of Stephen Lord, and according to all natural laws should be your mother."

CHAPTER XXXV.

ONE MAN DEAD.

You prince of liars!" hissed Lillian through her clinched teeth. "I may move as you pull the strings, but my mind is still my own. I can still see when you are testing your power; and can fight you to the death when it comes to such an aspersion on my mother—who died in my arms, like the saint that she was."

"All that rigmarole is useless," retorted the man, without evincing the least anger. "I can't see how dying in your arms could make the lady any the more saintly; but, that has nothing to do with my statement, which I must still insist is the bald-headed truth. The hag is certainly the discarded wife of the gentleman whose connection with the Gray Mare Mine is the foundation of your claim; and, if she chooses to fight you, she can prove it in the courts, if you can imagine there being such a thing as a hall of justice in this lawless land. All I want is a fair and square admission of the truth, so that I can show you why my course will be the right one. You understand that I am not much troubled with conscience; and after the game that you have started with me as part partner and part vic-

tim, I am inclined to think that the inward monitor never reached a very high development in your own case. Of course, we go ahead on the lines marked out; but don't, please don't, in private life, insist on the close relationship to the dear deceased. It makes me weak."

"And so you put the word of that old haridan—a woman who is retained for the other side—against mine? How will it be if the courts—for courts there will be, if they are not now—should take the same view of her statement that you do? What I say, or do not say, to you will make but little difference then."

"Rest easy. The charming madam will make no statements, either in court or elsewhere. In fact, I believe that she is dead. A merciful dispensation of Providence, you understand."

Lillian understood but too well. Slave as she was to this man's will, the horror of it went through her like a knife, and she half started up, a wild light in her eyes and her hand going instinctively to the place where she held her hidden weapons. The witch might be the most abandoned of her kind, and her own foe till death, but she was a woman. By no such murder would she willingly gain a fortune. In another moment she might have tried something desperate, in spite of the cold, sneering stare that this man fixed upon her. Then came an interruption, as suddenly as it was startling. The door opened, and Martha Doam stepped over the threshold! At her shoulder came Hebe Haywood!

When the witch confronted him the *sang froid* of Elmer Conroy for once deserted him. He stared at her as though he had seen a ghost—and little blame to him if he thought that she was one. Her face was ghastly pale save where it was streaked here and there with blood, or hidden with bandages, and the excitement that had sustained her on her way thither had almost burned away the little remaining life the hands of the assassins had left her. Then, too, there was something ghostlike in the way she regarded him, one lean, long finger outstretched, and pointing at him, while her glittering eyes devoured every line in his features.

Well disguised as he thought he was she saw through him at once.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed, huskily but with a bitter hatred. "It was but a glimpse that I had, yet I could not be mistaken in those eyes. And you would bolster up this monstrous fraud, and place this girl in the possession of the wealth of the man you slew, to be your puppet and your slave? Never! I will stand in front of you. I will hinder you. And if there is no other way I will take your life. That I have not done it long ago was that I could not find you. After the attack of your ruffians to-day there is not within me much to speak for mercy."

Excitement renewed her strength, and as she shook her withered hand at him she crouched as though about to spring.

Elmer Conroy, on the contrary, grew cooler as he heard her speak.

"You would kill me would you? Bless your soul there are men by the score who have been saying that for years, but I don't mind such raving. Only, I won't listen to it. I neither know nor care who you are. I simply refuse to listen to you longer. *Out of this!*"

If the woman had come to him, by herself little doubt that he would have slain her. He might be prudent at times, but he feared not man nor angels. Angels could not harm him, and men he brushed out of his way. This woman was no more to him than a man, only Hebe Haywood was standing behind her, and he could not kill them both, just then, without interfering with his plans.

And even with Hebe there he was almost willing to take the risk. Before the women knew that he was moving he had Martha Doam by the throat, and was saying:

"If you don't go when requested of course I must make you go—gently if possible, but speedily at any rate."

His fingers tightened mechanically till they shut off all breathing, and her face was growing even more ghastly as he urged her slowly backward toward the door, bearing her away from the side of Hebe Haywood, who stood motionless and staring at the unexpected attack.

Lillian Lord had listened calmly to what had been said, and in spite of the attack on herself had been feeling relieved that the witch was not dead, and had come in time to prevent the mad attempt on Conroy, that she had been about ready to make.

Now she rose once more. In Martha Doam's present enfeebled condition such rude handling might well cause her death, if it was carried a little further; and the man must know it. All the fury that lately possessed her came back.

"Hold, there!" she exclaimed, and with a pantherish spring cleared the distance between them. One hand dropped on Conroy's shoulder, while the other flourished a stiletto.

And then, before the blow could fall, Elmer Conroy went staggering back. Gentle Jack had sprung in through the doorway, by a deft movement, and an exertion of strength such as strangers would not have thought could lie in his frame, had snatched him from under Lillian's hands and hurled him clear across the room, while Tom Raymond caught the falling woman in his arms.

"If you please," said Mr. Armstrong, lightly. "What is going on here? I reckon we are just in time to stop a frolic or a funeral. In mischief as usual, Conroy? That's right! Draw! It's what I am yearning for. Only give me the chance and I'll guarantee a free passage over the range and no questions asked."

As Conroy always played with the advantages on his side it was not likely that he would accommodate Jack while the latter was looking at him. He was not afraid, but he did not care to court certain death. Instead he actually tried to brazen it out.

"I don't understand what you mean, and begin to think that you and the women are crazy together. I know nothing about you all, and I want to know nothing. Leave us; or take possession and I will go. If this thing keeps up there is no telling how many more will be in upon the war-path."

"Which don't alter the fact that you were trying to kill this woman when I chipped. How is she, Raymond? Any life left, or has the rascal sent her to the other land? If he has, I swear, I believe I will hold court myself, if I have to be judge and jury."

Mr. Armstrong's attention was centered on Conroy. He did not intend to give that gentleman a chance to get in a snap-shot, and he could only make out that the woman was motionless, and that possibly she was dead. "Alive yet," answered Raymond; "but I should judge that she had been having a close call, and I wouldn't swear that she is going to stay with us any time, though a grain of strength is beginning to flutter back. What is it all about, anyhow?"

Tom had moistened her lips from a flask, and was watching her eagerly. Her presence puzzled him, though he suspected that Hebe had discovered the identity of the man before them, and had come there to confound him. It was evidently fortunate that he and Armstrong had caught a glimpse of the two women as they entered the Home, and followed closely. At the question Jack took the risk and gave a glance at the face that was resting on Tom Raymond's shoulder.

The one look was sufficient.

"Stars and Stripes!" he exclaimed. "Who would have thought it? It is the ghost of Martha Haywood! No wonder the villain wanted to send her where the wicked cease from troubling. Man alive! She is yonder girl's mother! I have the whole thing down fine, now, and begin to see through the game. This young lady may be honest enough, but she is the daughter of the wrong man. And Conroy killed him, all the same. Perhaps I should have let her get in the work she was arranging when I came in, but the fact is that I have a pre-emption on the man myself, and couldn't bear to see him go."

For the first time he acknowledged Lillian's presence. He had seen well enough what she was doing when he entered the room, and might have said more now had it not been for another interruption. There was a voice from the doorway, and the speaker had heard all that Gentle Jack had just said.

"Who calls that woman Martha Haywood? What girl is this that you have declared was her daughter? Those words come home to me."

"I should think they did," retorted Jack. "I hinted to-night that you had another name before you filed on that of Haddington; and I reckon the first syllables began with Stephen Lord. You threw that Haywood nonsense overboard before you got this far in your flight from the East; and a very pretty mess you have made of it all around."

And Jack raised his hand to make a gesture that should include everybody, but altered his intention with startling rapidity. He caught the broad-brimmed hat from his head, and sent it floating swiftly across the room, and full at Elmer Conroy's face, while his other hand dove into his side-pocket in search of a derring.

At the words that he heard, Conroy had given one glance, full of deadly hatred. There was shoot in his eyes, and this time he drew. Only Jack Armstrong had read what was coming, and cast his hat with marvelous celerity, force and aim. Just as the revolver came up in line with the judge the sombrero struck his wrist. There was a flash and a report. The room filled with drifting smoke, and there was a dying man on the floor. That man was Elmer Conroy. As his finger tightened on the trigger the muzzle was flung upward and backward, and with his own hand he had ended his scheming forever!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TANGLE IS UNTIED.

THE report of a pistol in the street would not have created any excitement in the house. Here it was a different matter. The proprietor had an interest, and so had all the guests. The echoes had scarcely died away before there was a rush for the spot. Two or three men remembered that they had seen Gentle Jack go in—the news of the affair at the Daisy had reached the Home by this time—and that after a brief interval he had been followed by Judge Haddington. They came to the room expecting to find one or the other a corpse. Instead, they found them both very much alive.

"It's a bad piece of business," quietly murmured Jack to the first comers. "The gentleman on the floor thought he had an interest in the Gray Mare, and wanted to argue the question with his revolver. He could hardly have been an expert, for, instead of convincing the judge, he shot himself. You can see that he has the weapon still in his hand, and that one barrel, at least, has been discharged. A couple of you make an examination, for I don't want any mistakes about this. There had been some little feeling between the gentleman and myself, in the past, and as I didn't get away with him, I don't care to have him put on my record. I can only add, there is pretty good evidence that the man was the captain of the Copper Caps, and as thorough a villain as ever died unhung."

No one waited for further explanation, but all crowded around the fallen man. Armstrong turned to the judge.

"A pretty close call, that. If I had stopped to draw where would you have been? But the man is over the range now, and it's no use to linger here to answer questions. No doubt there is a mixture anyhow, that needs a little clearing up, and we had better adjourn while we have the chance. My room is none of the largest, but it is at your service if you feel like having a family reunion."

The magnate of the Gray Mare had recovered his self-possession somewhat since the fall of the man whose recognition had seemed to temporarily paralyze him. The females were huddled together near him. To all of them the suggestion was acceptable, and Jack conveyed them out without delay. Tom Raymond was going to drop back, but a sharp word from the sport brought him along quite like one of the family, and half-supporting the tottering steps of the witch of Doubledeck, while Hebe held her by the hand. The girl had received such a shock that as yet it was impossible fully to realize all that she had seen and heard.

"Now then, talk is cheap, and time means money," said Armstrong, closing the door of his room and facing the party. "As there is nothing in all this to put my head out of balance I guess I had better make a few explanatory remarks, and after that you may reach your own conclusions. You see, judge,

these two young ladies came to Doubledeck on practically the same errand—in search of Stephen Lord. The title to the mine was something else that they had an interest in, though with one of them at least that was entirely an afterthought. Conroy stumbled across the young lady who came down with us in the stage, and put her up to the idea of claiming the property; and it didn't worry him a particle that he had possibly killed her father—as I think he thought he had certainly assisted you over the divide. And here is this young lady, who seems to have been in blissful ignorance about certain points in your life, and to whom you have been one of the martyred dead. She came out to clear up the mystery of your disappearance, and dropped right down into all this other mystery.

"Suppose you explain a little? I confess it makes me tired when I think of it that I did not recognize you sooner, even if I never had any particular dealings with you; but you had grown clear out of my recollection, and put on flesh like a mountain. What I would like to know is what you meant by all this fool-play? It seems that you were going to hold on to the Gray Mare through a bill of sale from yourself, if the worst came to the worst. A bright idea, that, but a condemned lot of nonsense in it too. Open up, down to bed-rock, or by the living jingo I'll clap you in a lunatic asylum myself, and administer on your effects in the interests of the ladies."

"See here, Armstrong, the time is short for explanations, and I don't care about saying more than I have to about how I have been playing the fool. With Conroy dead I am ready to come out in the open, if I can do it without raking up too much of the old times. I left my daughter behind when I came West; and I left my name with her, though my brother, who took charge of her, understood that I intended to be Stephen Lord. The name was taken by chance, and without any idea that there would ever be another Richard in the field. My reasons for this I do not care to explain too thoroughly, even to you. They were important, and the worst of it was that Elmer Conroy knew what they were. You seem to understand about the trouble with my wife; and I give you my word that I thought she was dead."

"Well, after I and my partner had got into the Gray Mare I found that Conroy was in supporting distance, and had made inquiries that I was sure were directed toward me. I thought it was time to provide for the future. He was bad as the worst, and would kill me without hesitation if we met—or, failing that, he would send me back East. He was the only man living that I was thoroughly afraid of. Somehow, there was something about him that unnerved me, and I could not hold straight at him. I know that, for I had tried it. Perhaps you can understand me, since I understand that you have had trouble with him."

"Yes, I know all about it. I intended to kill the scoundrel myself; and always shirked the duty. He was a remarkable man in more ways than one. Go ahead."

"Well, my partner sold out his interest, and I took a blank bill of sale. Then I disappeared—and when I came back I was Judge Haddington. The fact that another Stephen Lord had been killed made a complication favorable to my designs; and as I had sworn in my partner to secrecy before we parted, I believed that the deception could be kept up long enough for me to develop the mine, in which I had perfect faith from the time that we first struck color. That explains as much about the mine as there is any need for. When my partner chooses he can come back and speak for himself. He will corroborate my story."

"As to my family—I imagine they are scarcely glad to see me. I cannot explain their presence, and do not know it is worth while to try. What I do know is that Gray Mare is in danger of being jumped. With the head of the conspiracy dead the tools can be managed, even if they secure a temporary advantage. I am more concerned lest something happen to the two or three men that are holding it until McCarthy and myself arrive with reinforcements. Your Irishman is there, and it would be a cold joke for you to lose him, after all."

"If he has his eyes open and a pair of tools

you needn't borrow any trouble about Barney. If he is not the rose he has lived very near it for some time, and can shoot about as well as his master. Still, it might be as well to go out and see what is going on. I'll attend to the matter if you have anything further to say in private to your freshly found family. You don't appear to have been doing exactly the square thing, but it is not too late to make amends."

"One word, and then I suppose I can withdraw," interrupted Lillian Lord. "It seems that I was the daughter of the other Stephen Lord, and had nothing to do with the mine, after all?"

"That is about the way it looks. It's a singular coincidence; but, after all, I have known lots of stranger things happen out here. I think you were honest enough all through, and if Conroy was able to mesmerize you—faith! it's nothing more than he did with the rest of us. If the man had not been wicked clear through he might have been a great one. If any of us can help you in any way let us know. I can let you into the particulars of your father's death later on."

"You can consider me your friend, also," said the judge, as she made a bow, and turned to leave the room. "I hold no malice, and perhaps you have worked me good, in spite of yourself. Do not leave until you see me again."

Martha Deam had remained perfectly quiet through the explanations, and Hebe held her hand in silence. Now the latter arose and went over to Raymond, who had so far remained silent in the background, but who had followed the conversation closely.

"And to think that after this man had saved my life, and lay almost dying because he had done it, I believed from some things he said in his ravings that he knew more about the death of my father than he dared to tell! I have watched him like a hawk. I have hated him with a more than passing hatred, and one day might have slain him. Yet he was all the time only too true to his word, was deceived by the man he had trusted, and would have followed me to his own death. Speak for yourself, Thomas Raymond. Can you ever forgive me?"

"If you had kept your own counsel I would never have known that I had anything to forgive; and if your father had been here when we struck the town, and I had once got a glimpse of him, perhaps I would not have been so faithful. Things have changed here in Doubledeck since we left it together. If no one recognized me as one of the men that located the Gray Mare, what use was there for me to speak until I had something more important to say? I believed that my Stephen Lord was dead until Mr. Armstrong made his suggestion. Then I thought of various little things that I had overlooked, and began to doubt. When I saw the 'judge' to-night I knew him at once. What more shall I say?"

"Nothing at all," interrupted the judge, extending his hand. "Pardon me, too, for I half-suspected that you had given away what you knew of my affairs. If the money comes out of the claim that I expect you will not be forgotten. I will have much to say to both you and my daughter. She has been ignorant of many things that I supposed she would find out when she came to years of maturity; but if she cared enough for me to hunt me up, perhaps she will not altogether hate me, now that she has found me. There is one thing that I ought to say: I had no complaint against my wife, except that I could not live with her. I had to kill her cousin—who was Conroy's brother—and after that there was always something between us, and we secured a mutual divorce, though the child was given to me. I married you against the wishes of the family, and very uncomfortable have they made it for me. Is not that the whole truth, Martha? If you chose to be dead to all the rest of the world as well as to me, what blame is there to me if I respected your wishes?"

"None," said the woman, faintly. "We could not live together, yet I cared for you as few women could have done. I, too, would have avenged your death. Yesterday this girl came to me, and I told her something of her life, and of mine, without revealing myself. To-day she came again, and found me where I lay, apparently slain."

The assassins of that man had been at work. He had recognized me, knew that I might spoil his game, and after that dared not spare. When she had somewhat revived me I had her bring me here, telling her that she should learn all that she was in search of—and more—when I had confounded the plotters. I am glad I have seen her, and you; but I am going away soon. Let us forgive and forget.

It was not a very happy family reunion, but things seemed to be arranging themselves in a great deal better shape than Armstrong had hoped for. He spoke up once more: "By daylight things may seem a good deal brighter. I would counsel rest for the ladies, and I will see that the people have cared for the corpse in the other room. Then, if the judge thinks it best, I will accompany him to the mine. You understand that I have an interest there, and some of my friends, who are depending on me, expect to have a larger one. And Barney must not be too utterly deserted."

The judge had an eye to business, and with Raymond and two or three of their friends hurried out of the town.

They made the journey through the dark in safety, and reached the mouth of the mine. As they approached there was no sign of anything beyond what was usual; but, as they hung over the dark shaft, a moment before descending, there came from below the muffled roar of an explosion. Then all beyond was once more silent.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BARNEY HOLDS HIS END LEVEL.

"SURE, an' Misther Armstrong has bin takin' his own time to hunt me up; av he wants me he kin wait a little longer, an' Oi'll say the fun."

So said Barney when McCarthy appealed to him to help them at the mine while he went in search of the judge and assistance. It was not a very pleasant prospect for the average man, but Barney was an Irishman, which is something more. The prospect of a row had its delights, and in his heart he really had no objections to a chance to get even with the men who had been holding him a prisoner.

McCarthy had not wasted much time in explaining the position of affairs to the men who were on guard at the mine. He wished there had been a dozen of them. Then he would have remained and fought it out without bothering Haddington. As it was, the only strength in the guard was the lack of knowledge as to its strength. Elmer Conroy might as well have sent his men in by the front door, so far as the ability to resist was concerned.

The spot chosen by Conroy for the invasion was selected with the skill of an engineer, and the exactness of one well acquainted with the mine. It was about the only place where a tunnel could have been driven, and it would enter the Gray Mare at a point where the raiders would have a good chance to establish themselves in a short, unfinished drift, before their presence was known. If the attack was successful in the outset, as there was every reason to believe that it would be, it would take an army to dislodge them, and meantime Conroy would be doing the work outside needed to convince any inquiring souls of the justice of the proceedings. It was a desperate undertaking, but it had its prospects of success.

One thing Conroy's gang did not know: their prisoners had escaped them. Another thing: those prisoners had learned what was on foot, and knew where to look for them on the other side of that thin wall of rock which was ready to yield to the last stroke of the pick. Barney was there, as McCarthy had stationed him, and the two regular watchmen were there under his orders. Simon, himself, was already on the run for Doubledeck, when Kain began to develop his ideas of defense.

"Arrah, now, an' it's little comfort there is in shooting in a cave. It's black it gets wid the smoke, in wan howly minnit; an' it's tin chances to twinty av ye hit the second man. Oi ought to know, for Oi've troied it. An' it's bluddy murder to shoot down tin or a dozzin men widout warnin'; an' av ye give it to them, it's down ye goes yersilf."

"What yer goin' ter do about it, then?" growled one of the watchmen, who was rather disgusted at being put under the orders of a stranger. "If we can't fight, I reckon ye must begin ter run away."

"Howld yer whist, ye spalpeen! Ye kin choke a dog wid butther, but there's more ways to smither him. We'll sarkimvint the raskils. Sure, I saw a barrel av powther yander. Roll it along, an' av they won't moinde sinse it's to kingdom come that we'll blow ivery mither's son av them."

"An' blow ourselves up along with them—eh?"

"Faix, an' Oi didn't think av that! But, rowl it along, anyhow. We'll sthand the chances, an' it's Barney Kain that will foire the blast."

"Roll it along yerself. I don't take no stock in this kind ov a racket and am going to climb out. And if Bob, here, knows what's what he'll climb too."

"You bet!" answered Bob heartily, taking the suggestion in the light of an appeal.

In a twinkling there was the sharp click of a pair of hammers, and the two men were covered with the revolvers that McCarthy had provided Barney with when they entered the mine.

"Rowll foorst an' climb afterwards. Av ye moves afore Oi have me thrap sit Oi'll drill yez both."

Short and sharp spoke the little Irishman, and the men saw that he was in deadly earnest, and had them lined, to boot. With a low growl the leading spirit threw up his hands, and his comrade followed the example.

"Don't be too rapid. If you will give us a chance to light out before the muss begins we'll do what we can for you as long as we stay. But, we ain't fools enough to try to fight a gang like that you say is coming through."

"Thin rowl up the powther, an' remimber Oi'll have yez kivered ivery shtip av the way. Howly mither! There's no danger for half an hour yit, an' by that toime McCarthy will be back wid the gang."

There was a shaking of heads at that, as if they had not much faith in Simon and his gang; but the powder was rolled up, and the two assisted Barney to arrange his mine in the unfinished drift. There was the chance, of course, that there might be some mistake about the spot, but, from what he had heard, McCarthy had thought there could be no doubt, and Barney relied upon his opinion. He knocked in the head of the barrel, laid a little train of powder from it, and then covered the barrel well with rocks.

"Git out, now, an' av yez say Mister McCarthy till him to hurry. Av they take me from the rare it's both inds Oi'll blow up, an' doie in the middle. Barney Kain niver gives up the ship."

The men waited for no more extended permission, but vanished immediately, leaving Barney alone. He looked around for some little time, by the light of his lantern, and then returned to the drift, and his mine.

"For fun it's the illegant cnance av the sayson; but for safety, sure an' Oi think Oi wor betther off befour Oi made me ischape," he muttered, as he seated himself upon a box and began to fill his pipe.

"Av Mc don't come soon it's bahd worruk Oi'll be afther makin' wid the omidhawms an' they troy their games wid me. It's the credit av Jintil Jack an' me own Oi'll be kapin', an' Oi'll do me livil bist."

For a moment or so he smoked furiously. Then he took the pipe from his mouth and listened. It seemed to him then he could hear the muffled sound of strokes at the other end of the drift.

"No danger yit; but they're a-comin':"

"Och, Mickey McGlural has gowld be the plinty, Pigs, praythies an' poipes, wid whiskey in shore, But Oi think not av them—Oi'm sart'inly crazy, Since Peggy has kissed me ferninst the back door, Swate Peggy McGlural, Ritural!"

Ouch! Howld me, me darlint, Oi'm kilt."

He lilted over a verse of his favorite song in a low voice, but with as much unction as though mines, raiders, and desperate doings were things of the distance. Then he took a few more rapid whiffs, and again listened.

Again he heard the knocking, somewhat louder, yet still muffled by the curtain of rock. Once more he sang;

"Och, Mickey McGlural, you're shlapin' nixt Sunday"

Whin Oi stale to yer kitchin as often befoore, Av ye knew ye wad give me a touch av shellaleigh; But it's Peggy will kiss me forninst the back door.

"Sure, Oi hear thim plainer, but there's toime for the last varse, an' a few more whiffs. Thin—"

"Och, Mickey McGlural, 'tis soon we'll be married, An' thin for the toime we're parthin' no more, But she'll laugh whin Oi taze her, an' call to her mim'ry The toimes that she kissed me forninst the back door."

Swate Peggy McGlural,

Ritural!

Ouch! Howld me, me darlint, Oi'm kilt."

The song ended, and again he smoked furiously. He could hear the strokes now, and there was no muffling wall between. There was also the hum of voices; and as he craned his neck around to look down the drift he could see a gleam of light. The time for the rush was at hand, and as yet there were no signs of McCarthy and his men.

A voice came from beyond.

"Steady now, boys. No noise. They are keeping mighty quiet but there is no telling who we may find there. We ought to have heard from the boss by this time, but no difference. Here we go!"

"An' where did yez think av goin'?" sung out the voice of Barney. "Back wid ye! It's Barney Kain that's kapein' this moine, an' at the foorst shtip insoide Oi'll blow yez all to niver kim back. It's howly truth Oi shpake an' don't yez forgit it."

"You infernal fool!" came back the voice that he had heard before; which he recognized as belonging to Dan Berdan. "Throw up your hands and keep quiet if you want to save your life. We have enough men here to take a dozen mines like the Gray Mare; and if there's a grain of powder burned we'll murder the last one of you!"

"It's the solim warnin' Oi gave yez. Back wid ye or yer blood's on yer own heads!"

There was a scornful laugh at the earnest caution, and again the voice gave the order to advance. Looking down the drift Barney caught a glimpse of moving figures and hesitated no longer. A strong pull or two at his pipe had brought the coal to a bright glow. He gave a sharp rap with the inverted bowl, that brought the fire down upon the train, while he flung himself backward along the main tunnel, and away from the drift.

Then there was an awful roar, the lights went out, a second crash as though the very earth had cracked and fallen together, and after that—silence.

At the sound in the mine below the judge knew that there had been desperate work—he feared that they had come too late.

"Quick!" he shouted. "They are blasting their way in. We may get there yet before the fighting begins!"

As he spoke half a dozen men came running up behind him, and he turned with his hands on his revolvers, more than half expecting an attack from the rear. Instead, he found that this was of the party that had started with McCarthy, and which he supposed had long ago reached the mine.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked sternly. "You should be down there. Where is McCarthy?"

"Reckon he won't quite go over the range this time; but he has had a mighty close shave. Some galoot—he says it was Turtle Tom, that has it in for him about shooting a pard of his—laid for him, and bored him just as we left town. Then we had to lay Sime away somewheres, and the rest of us were chasing the feller that made the shot; and between it all, I swear, we forgot all about the mine. We didn't know there was much hurry."

"I only hope that we have not come too late. There has been bad work down there; but, lower away. We will soon know the worst."

There were lanterns at the entrance of the mine, and they had them lit, and were advancing along the tunnel, which was reeking with the smell of gunpowder, when a little man came staggering toward them. He was bruised, and blackened with powder, and perhaps a little dazed, for he threw up the revolvers he held, and covered the judge at the same time chanting:

"Ouch! Howld me, me darlint, Oi'm kilt."

"Not this evening, Barney; some other evening," laughed Armstrong. "You seem to have been in business. What has happened?"

"Sure, Oi hild me-side livil, an' just pulled in wan ind av the tunnil. Av there's ony mon undther it he had warnin', an' it's not me fault, at all, at all."

"Good boy! Rest yourself a bit and we'll take stock of the damage."

But Barney was already almost himself again, and needed no rest. Under his guidance they hurried to the drift—and found that no entrance from that quarter need they fear. It was blocked with a solid mass of rock that would take a day to move—and perhaps a year.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the judge; "they were a set of scoundrels, anyhow, but I hope there are none of them under all that."

"Oi think not," said Barney. "Av they haded me warnin' they had toime to fall back. Mebbe av ye wor to go 'round on the ither soide ye moight catch thim yit."

In the interests of humanity the hint was taken, but none of the raiders did they find, though there were evidences that they had but lately beaten a retreat. If they all, including Dan Berdan and his pards, escaped scott-free, perhaps it was more than they deserved. At any rate the fight for the Gray Mare Mine was over; and when the debris was afterward removed there was nothing to show that any of the gang had perished under the pile.

A few words more will finish the story. Of course Gentle Jack sent back the report that the Gray Mare was O. K., and the company completed the purchase and prospered.

The judge's former wife drifted away, though he would have provided for her; and Hebe elected to remain with him until, in course of time, she married rugged Tom Raymond. Handy Hank and his pard were not heard from, but doubtless they reached Mexico safely. Lillian Lord found the grave of her father—of course he had nothing to do with finding the Gray Mare Mine—and then went away sorrowing. Simon McCarthy recovered, and remained manager at the mine, while Gentle Jack, having won his bet with Raymond—which he duly collected, having completed his investigations, and having cleaned out at draw the chiefs who sat down with him, departed, taking Barney in his train; and Doubledeck knew him no more.

THE END.

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